

The Lakewood Boys On The Lazy S

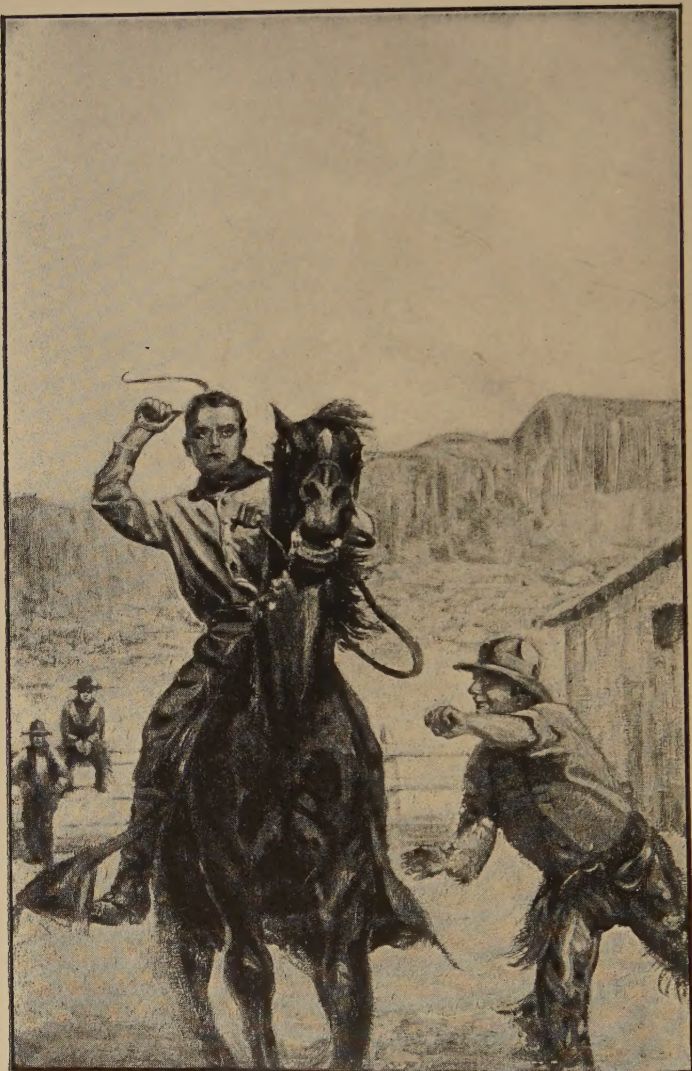


L. P. WYMAN

Harry Herrickson.

CHS-(52)A

Christmas
1929



Then he turned as if on a pivot and with a suddenness which all but unseated the boy.
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THE LAKEWOOD BOYS ON THE LAZY S

By L. P. WYMAN, PH.D.
Dean of the Pennsylvania Military College

AUTHOR OF

"The Lakewood Boys in the Frozen North," "The Lakewood Boys and the Lost Mine," "The Lakewood Boys and the Polo Ponies," "The Lakewood Boys in the South Sea Islands,"
"The Golden Boys Series," etc.



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The Lakewood Boys Series

**A SERIES OF STORIES FOR BOYS 12 TO 16
YEARS OF AGE**

By L. P. WYMAN, Ph.D.

Dean of the Pennsylvania Military College

The Lakewood Boys In the Frozen North

The Lakewood Boys On the Lazy S

The Lakewood Boys And the Lost Mine

The Lakewood Boys and the Polo Ponies

The Lakewood Boys In the South Sea Islands

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THE LAKEWOOD BOYS ON THE LAZY S

Made in "U. S. A."

THE LAKEWOOD BOYS ON THE LAZY S.

CHAPTER I.

THE RESCUE.

"THAT cloud over there's coming this way pretty fast, Bob."

"Does look rather squally for a fact, but I've just got to have it out with that pickerel. The beggar's stole three frogs already and I simply can't let him get away with a thing like that."

"Make it snappy, then. It's going to rain inside of ten minutes and, from the looks, it'll be some rain."

With a long cast Bob Lakewood threw his fourth frog far over toward a patch of lily pads and, for a moment, held his rod, a look of keen expectancy on his face.

"He's taken it again," he announced a moment later." Now hurry up and gobble it down then we'll see who's who."

"Bet you miss him again," his brother grinned.

Bob made no reply but gave a sudden sharp jerk to the pole. This time there was a decided resistance at the other end of the line and he hurriedly began to reel in. But before he had recovered more than a few yards the big fish, evidently making up its mind that it had come far enough, made a sudden rush for the lily pads and the reel hummed as the line cut through the water.

"He's a big one, all right," Jack shouted.

Bob was pressing on the drag as hard as he dared, hoping to stop the fish before it reached the pads, knowing that once among them it was as good as lost. He succeeded just as he was about to give up hope and began reeling in once more.

"Stand by with the net," he panted.

Jack obeyed but the fish had not yet given up the fight and, although the greater part of the line had been regained, the rush which followed took it nearly all out again. Four times this was repeated before the fish, tired out with the struggle, lay gasping on the bottom of the boat.

"He's a beauty," Jack declared. "Six pounds if he's an ounce and that's larger than any we've caught in this lake."

A low but distinct rumble turned their attention from the pickerel and Jack sprang for the bow and began hurriedly to pull in the anchor.

"We've got to get a hustle on if we're going to beat it in," he declared as he grasped the wheel while Bob turned a small switch. Instantly the boat began to move, although there was no sound of an engine. A small but powerful electric motor, run by a secret type of storage cell, took the place of the usual gasoline engine. Rapidly the craft gained speed until, in less than three minutes, she was cutting through the water at a rate of nearly fifteen miles an hour.

"Better put up the top," Jack shouted a few minutes later as the first drops of rain warned him that they had started too late.

It took Bob but a moment to pull the canvas top over the boat but it was raining hard as he resumed his seat and moved the switch over another notch. A sharp flash of lightning followed by a deafening peal of thunder seemed a prelude to the sudden rush of wind which swept over the lake kicking the water into white caps all about them.

"She's a hummer, all right," Jack shouted, but so loud was the howling of the wind that Bob scarcely heard him. "You giving her all she's got?" he yelled a moment later.

"She's on the last notch," Bob shouted back, but the crackling of the thunder added to the roaring of the wind, made it doubtful if Jack heard him.

By the time they were half-way to the wharf the

lightning was almost incessant and the rain was coming down in sheets, shutting out the shore and Jack was steering wholly by instinct.

"Better slow her down," Jack shouted a little later. "I can't see more than a few feet ahead but, unless we're off the course we must be pretty near in."

"Just what I was thinking," Bob shouted as he pushed back the lever several notches.

The wind being dead against them the boat rapidly lost headway and Bob soon had to advance the lever a couple of notches in order to maintain headway. The rain was falling so rapidly now that the surface of the lake was almost smooth, the waves being beaten down by the force of the water before they could rise hardly above the surface.

"It must be a cloudburst," Jack yelled back.

"And then some," Bob added, shouting at the top of his voice.

A few more minutes passed and suddenly Jack shouted:

"Reverse her, quick."

Bob obeyed the order and the propeller churned the water in the effort to overcome the momentum of the boat.

"Just right."

The words came just as the boat struck something with the slightest of shocks and, in another minute

she was securely fastened under the lee of the wharf.

"Talk about luck," Jack grinned as he shook the water from his arms which had been soaked as he reached out beneath the canvas top in order to make the boat fast.

"Don't see how you did it," Bob assured him.

"Just pure luck," Jack repeated. "My, but that water's wet."

Bob was about to say something when a shrill cry arrested his attention and, glancing out through the tiny window in the side of the top, he saw a woman struggling to make her way toward them.

"Now I wonder——" he began, but before he could get any further the woman had reached the side of the boat and was making frantic gestures for him to come out.

"It's Mrs. Leeds," he shouted to Jack as, without a moment's hesitation he pushed aside a flap of the covering and crawled out onto the wharf.

He was drenched to the skin in an instant but, from the woman's appearance he had judged that something serious was the matter. Nor was he mistaken.

"Clara's out there in a canoe," she cried, wringing her hands.

"Which way?" Bob shouted back.

"That way," she replied, pointing down the lake. "I saw her coming in just before the storm struck

and then the rain blotted her out and—and,——”
But she could say no more.

“We’ll get her,” Bob shouted, jumping back into the boat.

“Get the top down, quick, old man,” he cried.
“We’ll need all the eyes we’ve got. There’s a girl out there somewhere and it’s up to us to find her. Make it snappy now.”

The top was down and the boat untied by the time he had finished speaking and in another minute was racing down the lake. The motor as well as the cell was inclosed in a watertight casing so there was no fear of the rain, which continued with unabated fury, interfering with the running of the boat.

They were now running nearly with the wind and so great was the speed that Bob soon shut off the motor entirely, and even then the boat sped through the water at a rapid rate.

“She must be blown clear across the lake by this time unless she capsized,” Jack shouted after they had been gone from the wharf about five minutes.

“God help her if she did,” Bob cried straining his eyes to pierce the wall of water which seemed to shut them in on all sides.

“Better give her a little juice,” Jack advised.
“We’ll never catch a canoe at this rate. It’ll blow faster than we will.”

"Right you are," and Bob threw over the lever a couple of notches.

The boat leaped forward like a thing alive and for an instant the wind seemed to die down to a gentle breeze, but he knew that it was blowing as hard as ever. Then, almost as quickly as it had come, the rain lessened. It was, as Jack afterward declared, almost as though someone had turned off a spigot.

"There's the canoe," Jack shouted a moment later pointing to the right and, at the same time, swinging the boat about in a wide sweep.

Following his gesture Bob saw the canoe, bottom up, bobbing up and down on the waves, which, now that the rain had nearly ceased, were running high, and his heart sank within him as the certainty of the girl's fate struck him. But a moment later he was electrified as Jack cried out that she was clinging to the stern. And now, as they came nearer he could see that he was right. A slim arm reached up out of the water and a hand was fastened to a ring in the end of the canoe. But, even as he gazed, the fingers lost their hold and were gone.

In an instant Bob had kicked off his shoes and thrown aside his coat. Then, as the boat swept up close to the canoe, he disappeared over the side. Down he swam, striving to pierce the water with his eyes. It must be pretty deep here, he thought, kick-

ing out more lustily as the pressure in his lungs warned him that he must soon have air. He failed to reach the bottom before he knew that he must give up and had just turned for the rise when his eye caught sight of an object a few feet to his right. It was she and with a prayer that he might be able to hold out, he plunged desperately for her. Grabbing her by the hair he beat the water frantically with his free hand and slowly rose toward the surface, although it seemed to him that they were stationary.

Would they ever reach the air? His lungs seemed on the point of bursting, but the thought of dropping his burden never entered his mind. Desperately he worked his legs in an effort to hurry their progress. Then, just when it seemed that he could stand it no longer, his head broke through the water and he breathed the life-giving air.

Raising himself as high as possible, so as to hold the girl's head above water, he shook the water from his eyes and looked about. Jack was only a few yards away and had already caught sight of him.

"Hold hard a minute," he shouted encouragingly.

Bob was certain that the girl was unconscious and he feared that she might be dead, although he hardly thought it likely, as she had been beneath the water not more than two minutes at the most. He trod water with all his strength and, although it seemed

to him a long time, it was not more than a minute from the time his head appeared above the water, when Jack reached over the side of the boat and lifted the girl aboard. He quickly followed saying as he climbed over the side:

"Full speed for home, old man, and I'll see what I can do for her."

He had long been an expert at "first aid" and, throwing a long cushion onto the bottom of the boat, he placed her face down upon it. Then, placing his hands beneath her, he gently raised her up and held her while the water ran from her mouth. Then, turning her onto her back he began raising and lowering her arms in an effort to start respiration. Soon he was rewarded by a faint tinge of color which stole back to her face and a moment later she gave a slight gasp and opened her eyes.

In spite of the wind, which still blew a gale, the boat was plowing through the water at a good rate throwing the white spray high on either side of the bow.

"How did I——?" she whispered, but Bob placed his fingers gently over her lips.

"Don't try to talk now, please," he cautioned her. "You are safe and will be all right in a short time but, just now, you need all your strength."

She obediently closed her eyes and, by the time they reached the wharf some ten minutes later, she

was breathing easily and regularly. Half a dozen people, including the girl's mother, were on the wharf, and they broke into shouts of joy as they saw that the girl was safe. Tears were streaming from the mother's eyes as she took the girl from Bob's arms and clasped her to her breast.

"My darling," she sobbed. "I thought that you were drowned, but, thank God, you are safe."

"You'll have to thank those two boys, too," the girl whispered.

But when Mrs. Leeds turned from her daughter to look for them they were no where in sight. Hating to have a fuss made over them, Bob and Jack, as soon as they were convinced that the girl was all right, had hastened to their room in the hotel which stood just at the end of the wharf.

As their folks were all away for a few days, their own cottage, situated near the head of the lake, was closed for the time being and they were boarding at the hotel.

"Old Wesserunsette can pick up quite a fuss when she gets her dander up," Jack laughed as he began stripping off his wet clothes.

"I'll say she can," Bob agreed, glancing out of the window. "Look at those white caps out there. It's no wonder she tipped over."

"And now, I suppose the boy hero will have to marry the pretty girl he saved from a watery grave

and live happily ever after," Jack gibed and dodged just in time to escape a wet shoe. "Oh, well, if you feel that way about it, I'll keep still," he laughed.

"You better had," Bob growled, struggling to pull off a wet sock.

"What do you suppose became of that canoe?" Jack asked a few minutes later. "I forgot all about it."

"Same here. But I guess it'll be all right. It can't sink and it's probably been blown ashore by this time."

"If it doesn't pound to pieces on the rocks."

"Well, it can't be helped now. We'll have a look for it after supper if the wind goes down."

"There goes the supper bell," Jack said a few minutes later. "I hate to go down for fear they'll make a big fuss over us and I do hate that sort of thing."

"Same here, but we've got to face it sometime and I suppose we might as well go down now and have it over with."

There were some twenty-five or more people in the dining-room as they entered and their worst fears were realized. Everyone stood up as soon as they appeared and a big man over in one corner shouted:

"Three cheers for the Lakewood boys!"

The cheers were given with a will and all they could do was to stand still and blush.

"Speech," someone shouted.

The room suddenly became quiet and Bob, after a hasty glance around, as though looking for a chance to escape, said:

"Thank you all but——"

"No buts about it," someone interrupted.

"All right," Bob said, "no buts goes, so we'll again say thanks and let it go at that." And he hastened across the room to their table closely followed by Jack.

A loud clapping of hands followed and then the folks, aware of the boy's confusion, turned to their supper, much to the satisfaction of Bob and Jack.

"Thank goodness, that's over," Jack whispered, as he picked up his napkin.

"But here comes Mrs. Leeds and Clara," Bob groaned.

The Leeds, mother and daughter, were from New York City and had been at the lake only three or four days. The boys had noticed them several times and had even remarked on the extreme beauty of the girl, who was about seventeen, but they had not met them formally. The boys rose as they approached their table.

"I—I do not know how to thank you," Mrs. Leeds hesitated as she held out her hand to Bob.

"Please do not try," Bob smiled as he grasped her hand. "We are very glad that we were able to do what we did."

"Modesty is a sure sign of true bravery," Mrs. Leeds smiled as she shook hands with Jack.

She then introduced Clara, who thanked them very prettily but, as Jack declared afterward, "didn't gush a mite," for which they were truly grateful.

"We expect Mr. Leeds to-morrow night," Mrs. Leeds told them, "and I know you will like him."

"Everyone loves daddy," Clara added.

"We're going to take a look for the canoe after supper," Bob said and added with a blush, "perhaps you would like to go with us. The wind has about died down and it will be pleasant on the lake."

"Oh, say we'll go," Clara looked imploringly at her mother.

"Why, I'm sure we'll be delighted if we won't be in the way," she assured them.

Both Mrs. Leeds and Clara showed great interest in the motive power of the Chum, as the boys called the boat, and Bob explained the motor and the cell which operated it. To the great satisfaction of the boys neither of their guests referred again to the rescue while they were on the water, evidently sensing that it was their wish.

The run down the lake was quickly made and,

after a short search along the shore, they found the canoe washed up on the sand and entirely uninjured. They made the return trip more slowly, as it was very pleasant on the lake just as the sun was sinking behind the hills.

"I think I know how you feel," Mrs. Leeds said as they parted an hour later, "but I must just say thank you once more."

Although her words were so simple both boys knew, from the tears which gathered in her eyes, that they came from her heart, and they felt that they had made some new friends worth having.

CHAPTER II.

MR. LEEDS TELLS A STORY.

MR. LEEDS arrived the next day and, shortly before supper time, Clara met the boys in the parlor of the hotel and insisted that they come over to their cottage and meet him. They were somewhat surprised to find him a man well past fifty, as they had thought of him as much younger. As he rose to greet them they noticed that he was very lame in his right leg and he did not look as though he was in good health.

"These are the boys who pulled me out of the 'drink,'" Clara introduced them.

A most engaging smile lighted up the man's face as he held out both hands toward them.

"I feel that I know you already," he said. "Clara has not talked of anything else since I got here and her mother has run her a close second. I—I hardly know where to begin in expressing my feelings to you. You see, she is all we have and—and—"

In spite of himself his voice broke and Bob quickly filled in the gap.

"Please do not try, sir. We both know how you feel and really it was nothing."

"Well, I like that," Clara declared.

Bob's face turned the color of a ripe tomato, according to Jack's statement made later, and he stammered:

"I—I didn't mean it that way, I—I——"

"I suppose you meant that it was nothing unusual for you to save a girl from the briny deep," Clara interrupted.

"Only it wasn't briny," Mrs. Leeds laughed and her laughter, in which they all joined, did much to relieve the situation.

"Maine is a great state, the greatest in the Union."

It was nearly half past eleven o'clock and the boys were sitting with Mr. Leeds on the porch of the latter's cottage. Mrs. Leeds and Clara had retired and the boys had started to take their departure, but Mr. Leeds had begged them to keep him company a while longer and it was he who made the above statement.

"You don't have to tell us that," Jack assured him.

"I suppose not. You see, I was born here, that is, in this state away up north in a little place called Matagamon. There were only about twenty people there then and I don't suppose there are many more now. I don't imagine you ever heard of it."

"Oh, yes, we have, although we've never been there," Jack assured him. "Isn't it on the East Branch of the Penobscot?"

"It sure is. It's been nearly thirty years since I have been there, but there isn't much territory within a radius of fifty miles from the place that I didn't know back in those days. It was pretty wild country then and, for that matter, I guess it is now."

"I'll bet you had lots of adventures," Jack ventured.

"Well, yes, I suppose you would call them that. I owe this game leg to a bear."

"Oh, please tell us about it," Jack said as he paused.

"Well, if it isn't too late and you care to hear it——"

"It's never too late for us to hear a real bear story," Bob laughed, as he hesitated.

"To begin at the beginning, then, I'll have to tell you of an old legend which the old folks used to tell us children when I was very small. It seems that nearly three hundred years ago a small tribe of Indians had their dwelling place up near what is now called Big Machias Lake. By the way, the only big thing about the lake is its name, as it isn't more than a mile long. In fact, it is really nothing more than a widening of the Big Machias River.

"They were called the Tutehonekut'qin Indians

and, it was believed that they had made their way overland from the Yukon River in Alaska, as there used to be a tribe of that name there."

"I wonder if they were any relation to King Tut of Egypt," Jack interrupted.

"Maybe," Mr. Leeds laughed. "At any rate, they were not poor relations for, according to the legend, they were possessed of almost fabulous wealth, gold and precious stones, being as common as are iron and glass with us."

"But where did they get them?" Bob asked.

"Well, if there was any truth in it, they must, of course, have brought their wealth with them from far off Alaska. But gold and jewels they had in abundance. But the pride of the tribe was Rippling Water, the daughter of Mato-wopa-geya, chief of the tribe. She must have been a wonderful girl. Straight and supple as a young sapling, with a wealth of raven black hair, she could outrun and outpaddle any of the braves of the tribe, so the legend ran.

"But one day trouble, unbeknown to them, appeared in the person of a young brave from another tribe. He came, he saw and was conquered in so far as the maid was concerned, but, alas, he did not conquer. Rippling Water's heart had, for many moons, been in the keeping of Wawiekumig, a young brave of her own tribe, and she turned a deaf ear

to the wooing of the stranger. Unfortunately, the strange brave, being the son of a mighty chief, had always had his own way and, instead of accepting her refusal as a gentleman, he went away vowing revenge. Nor was it long in coming. Before another moon had passed a band of warriors, outnumbering the Tutehonekut'qui many times, fell upon them and wiped them from the face of the earth."

"Did they kill the girl?" Jack asked.

"The legend states that she was the only one left alive and she was dragged away by the stranger. But it also states that she died soon after and that often, on a moonlight night, her spirit has been seen and heard bewailing the fate of her people."

"Did they get the gold and jewels?" Bob asked.

"According to the legend they did not."

"Then what became of it?"

"It was hidden in a cave and to find that cave was my mission when I met the bear. You'll probably think I was very foolish to take any stock in an old legend but, as a matter of fact, I had rather more than that to go on and I was only seventeen. You see, about a year before I had gotten acquainted with an old Indian, who lived all by himself on the shore of Chesuncook Lake. His name was Aquqarenuts, meaning cross feathers, and it happened in this way. I was up there on a hunting trip with my father, late in the fall, and we came upon the

old man's cabin purely by accident and found him very sick with pneumonia. We stayed and nursed him and he lived. He was very grateful and it was the following summer while I was staying a few days with him that he told me the legend I have told you. Of course, I had heard it before, but the old Indian declared that he knew it to be true and, needless to say, his words made a deep impression on my mind, especially when he assured me that he was a descendant of Wawiekumig, who, he declared, had escaped the massacre. It was a few months later, during another visit, that he told me of the hidden treasure. It seems that the knowledge of the hiding place had been handed down from one generation to another."

"Had he never looked for it?" Bob asked as he paused.

"He said he had not, explaining that gold would be of no use to him. But he, insomuch as he was the last of his race, offered to take me to the place and help me recover it. You can imagine how eagerly I accepted the offer. It was, he said, in a cave on the shore of Big Machias Lake. There was but one entrance to the cave and that was under water and one had to dive and swim through to get in."

"No wonder it was never found," Jack declared.

"Big Machias Lake is about eighty miles to the north of Chesuncook through the unbroken wilder-

ness and we planned to be gone two weeks. Twenty miles a day through those woods was a good day's work, and he assured me that it would take several days to get the gold and jewels out.

"For three days everything went well and, when we camped that night, he assured me that we would reach the lake the next day. But when I awoke the following morning, Aquqarenuts was gone. His blanket was there on the ground beside me and, so far as I could see, he had taken nothing with him, not even his rifle. At first I thought nothing of it, supposing that he had merely gone a short distance for some purpose and would soon be back. But when an hour had passed and he had not returned, I began to feel uneasy, and at the end of another hour I started out to look for him. I didn't find him and I never saw him again."

"But what happened?" Bob asked.

"That I never knew. All that day I searched and at night I was about the most worried and tired boy you ever saw. No, I never knew what became of him. Sometimes I have thought that he might have repented telling me about the hidden treasure but, inasmuch as he had already described the place so that I could hardly help finding it, I hardly think it likely. No, I prefer to think that some wild beast killed him and dragged him off to his lair, although I confess it hardly seems possible.

"Well, I debated with myself until long into the night, whether to go on and try to find the place by myself or to give it up and go back. I was well versed in forest lore and did not doubt my ability to find my way back. But finally I determined that I would try to find the lake, seeing that I was so near and there was always the hope that the Indian would come back. So I started early in the morning and was making fairly good time in spite of hard traveling, when, suddenly, after pushing through a dense clump of bushes, I came face to face with an enormous black bear. I know they say that a bear will run from a man, but this one must have been untrained in the way a bear should act when meeting a man for, with a deep roar she charged straight for me. Of course, she may have had a cub somewhere and that would explain her action, but I didn't see any and don't believe there was one. My rifle was strapped to my back and she was almost on me when I got it pointed and pulled the trigger. But she didn't stop and before I had time to fire again she had given me a cuff with her huge paw which sent me flying end over end. But my shot had pierced her heart and the blow was her last effort. As I picked myself up I was conscious of an intense pain in my right hip where the bear had hit me and to my dismay I found that I was unable to bear any weight on it. That it was broken I had little doubt.

Imagine my situation. To be sure I was much nearer home than the place from which we had set out, but it was all of forty miles away and probably nearer fifty, and, to the best of my knowledge, there was not a soul any nearer. Fortunately I had food enough to last me for several days, so there was no danger of starving for the present at least. But I had no water, as we did not carry any, depending on brooks and springs for our supply.

"It was not a cheerful situation, but I did not lose heart. I found that the only way in which I could move was to hitch along on my left side and even so every movement caused me intense pain. But I remembered crossing a small brook about a mile back and I was resolved to reach it, if possible. I suppose I was an hour making a hundred yards. Remember, I had to drag my pack along with me and it was by no means a light one.

"That journey has always been a nightmare to me, but I am not going to worry you with the details. It was nearly dark when finally I reached the brook and never since have I tasted anything as good as that water. As you can imagine, I was very tired and, in spite of the throbbing pain in my hip, I fell asleep there by the side of the stream and it was broad daylight when I awoke.

"I knew that I was in a serious position. To reach home in my condition was plainly out of the

question. It had taken me the better part of a day to cover a mile and at that rate it would take a month or more to reach home, and long before that my supply of food would run out. Now my only hope seemed to be to remain where I was, by the side of the brook, and trust that some hunter would find me while I was still alive. Fortunately I had a good supply of ammunition for my rifle and I decided that I would fire a shot at intervals of two hours.

"The pain in my hip had now subsided to a dull ache, although every movement still gave me intense pain, so I kept as still as possible, moving only when I was obliged to. Well, it must be getting late, so I'll have to cut my story short. I was there a week before two hunters, from my own town, found me. They were three days getting me home and it was another day before we could get a doctor. He set my hip and, under the circumstances, I guess he did as good a job as was possible, but I never walked straight again."

"And you never went back to look for the cave?" Bob asked.

"No, it was a long time before I could walk at all, but I told another fellow about it and he found it, the cave, I mean, but there was no gold there."

"And did the Indian ever turn up?" Jack asked.

"No. It has always been a mystery what became of him."

Just then a clock in the cabin struck one and the boys started up with an exclamation of surprise.

"Gracious, I didn't know it was so late," Bob said. "Thanks for the story. Come on, Jack, we must beat it."

"Just a minute," Mr. Leeds said, as they were about to start off. "When I said that Maine was the greatest state in the Union, of course, I was not referring to its size."

"I know there are other states larger," Bob acknowledged somewhat grudgingly. "I suppose Texas is quite a lot bigger."

"Well, slightly," Mr. Leeds laughed. "In fact, few people this way have any idea as to its size. Perhaps you will appreciate it when I tell you that eight states of the size of Maine could be very comfortably placed in Texas."

"Great guns, do you mean that?" Jack exploded.

"Figure it out for yourself," Mr. Leeds laughed. "Maine has 33,040 square miles of territory and Texas has 265,896."

"Some state," Jack gasped.

"Were you ever in the state?" Bob asked.

"Many times. In fact, I own a fairly large cattle ranch out there."

"What's its name?" Bob asked.

"We call it the Lazy S."

"That's rather a funny name," Jack suggested.

"Many ranches out that way have queer names," Mr. Leeds told them.

"This one takes its name from a small river which runs through it. You see, it is curved in the shape of an S and the country is so flat there that there is but a very slight current; in fact, it is only about a half a mile an hour."

"I'd sure like to see it, the ranch, I mean," Jack declared.

"I don't see why you can't," Mr. Leeds told him.

"Texas is a long way from here," Bob sighed as they again said good night.

When, five minutes later, Bob snapped on the light in their room, he looked at Jack and Jack looked at him.

"Well?"

"Of course," Jack replied.

"Of course what?"

"Of course we're going to Texas."

"Who said so?"

"You did."

"I never mentioned it."

"Not in words, perhaps, but you looked at me, didn't you?"

"I guess you're a mind reader, all right," Bob laughed. "To tell the truth, I was wondering how you felt about it."

"Well, you know now, I reckon," Jack grinned.

"It would be wonderful," Bob mused. "I've always had a longing to see a real sure enough ranch."

"Same here. Any reason why we shouldn't go?"

"I don't know of any, that is, unless father objects and I don't know why he should."

"Well, he'll be back to-morrow and we can ask him," Jack declared as he turned out the light and tumbled in to bed.

CHAPTER III.

SLIM AND SLATS.

MR. ROBERT LAKEWOOD was a well-to-do manufacturer, and, having entire confidence in his boys, both as to their moral character and their ability to take care of themselves, he, shortly after his arrival the following day, made no objection to the proposed trip.

"I have known Mr. Leeds by reputation for some years and have met him once or twice," he said, "and if he is willing for you to go, I think it will be a wonderful experience for you."

It turned out that, as soon as the owner of the ranch learned that they really wished to go and that their father was willing, he was most enthusiastic and declared that he would at once write to his foreman and tell him that they were coming and that they were to have the full run of the ranch.

"You'll like Jeb," he told them. "There's a real he-man for you and what he don't know about the cattle business simply doesn't exist."

* * * * *

"Some folks shore has all the luck."

"Meaning what, Slim?"

"Slim" Jones, a man who, in his high-heeled boots, stood all of five feet three inches and weighed fully a hundred and eighty pounds, glanced quickly up at his companion, a tall, lanky individual, who responded to the name of Slat.

"Meaning jest what I said, that's what. Here I've got to hitch up and drive all the way inter Cold Springs ter meet them eastern dudes an' all you gotter do is ter stay here an' mend fence."

"Slat" Magee laughed as he drew himself up to his full six feet four.

"You poor child," he drawled. "You shore do seem ter have it rubbed in ter ye fer a fact. But, as the preacher said, 'it's never so bad but it might be worse,' so cheer up, ol' timer, an' put the best fut first."

"Easy 'nough ter give advise when ye're on the safe end," Slim growled as he got up from the nail keg on which he had been sitting.

"Tell you what'll I'll do jest ter show there's no hard feelings. I'll flip a coin ter see who goes and stays ter mend fence."

"Yer mean it?"

Slim looked slightly incredulous as he felt in his pocket.

"Shore thing, but no whining if yer lose."

Slim had pulled a half-dollar from his pocket and

as he rested it on his thumb-nail preparatory to snapping it into the air, he said:

"Never a whine. How yer want it?"

"Heads I stay, tails you go."

"Righto, here she goes," and he spun the coin high in the air. "Tails it is," he announced disgustedly an instant later. "Didn't I tell yer as how some folks has all the luck. I hain't a whinin' now, I'm only makin' a statement o' fact."

"It's shore too bad," Slat's consoled him. "But you'll enjoy the trip if yer only make up yer mind to it." And he started off toward the corral while the mournful loser, with a deep sigh of disgust, turned toward the huge barn.

"Much obliged jest the same fer givin' me a chance," he called back over his shoulder.

"Don't mention it, ol' timer," the other shouted back.

It was some two hours later when Slim Jones driving along the rough and dusty road on the way to the town, suddenly drew rein and, as the bronchos came to a willing stop, he muttered "heads I stay, tails you go." Several times he repeated the phrase, each time a little louder until the last time he was almost shouting.

"Why, if it hadda come heads I'd a had ter go jest the same," he declared. "The onnery slab-sided, red-haired skunk. If he tells the boys I'll never hear

the last of it. I'll stretch his onery hide on ter the barn door fer that, I will, sure's my name's Slim Jones." Then, after a moment's thought, he continued his soliloquy. "If I warn't more'n half-way there I'd turn back and make him go." For several moments he sat in deep thought and finally a slight grin began to spread over his broad features and, picking up the rein, he muttered:

"Well, if he don't tell no one mebbly I'll only shoot him full o' holes."

The ultimate destiny of Slats Magee having been settled to his satisfaction, Slim tightened the reins and clucked to the drowsing bronchos whereupon they started off with a sudden jump which all but jerked him over backward.

"Hey, thar," he shouted, "don't ye know enough ter start up without yanking the bottom out o' all creation when I step on the gas?"

Evidently mistaking his question for a command the bronchos stopped so suddenly that it was only by the merest chance that Slim saved himself from pitching over the dashboard.

"What the Sam Hill's got inter yer onery hides?" he shouted as he drew himself back onto the seat. "Seem's how ye think I got no right ter give orders, but I'll larn ye if ye go ter cuttin' up any more didoes. Now yer better start up easy like 'f ye want ter keep yer skins on whole."

As if sensing that the driver meant business the bronchoes started off again this time breaking into a swift trot which seemed to suit Slim, for he settled back in his seat with a sigh of relief. An hour later the buckboard swung into the main street of the sleepy little town of Cold Springs and on toward the station at the farther side.

"Yep, train's on time. Be here in 'bout twenty minutes more or less," the station agent told him as he paused by the open window.

But it was nearly an hour before the train pulled in and Slim, pacing up and down the platform nearly had, what he called, the fidjets before the whistle was heard far down the line. But nearly all things come to an end sooner or later and he brightened up as he saw two boys, the only passengers to alight, swing off the rear steps as the train came to a standstill.

A large trunk was dropped from the baggage car to the platform and in a moment the train had disappeared around a curve just beyond the town.

"Guess them's my freight, all right," Slim muttered to himself as he stepped toward them. "You the fellers what's goin' out ter the Lazy S?" he asked pausing a few feet away.

"Yes, sir, that's where we want to go," Bob replied.

"Well I come in ter git yer."

"Then you must be Mr. Jones."

"Hey?"

"I said you must be Mr. Jones," Bob repeated.

"Don't know the gent. He may be——" then Slim stopped short and turned as red as his thick coating of tan would allow. "Now you mention it, my name is Jones," he said slowly. "Yer see," he grinned, "that's the first time I've been called anything 'cept Slim fer so long that hanged if fer a minute, I didn't remember what my proper handle is, but it's Jones, all right."

"My name is Robert Lakewood and this is my brother John, but our friends call us Bob and Jack," Bob explained.

"But how'd you know my handle?" Slim demanded.

"Why, Mr. Leeds told us about you," Bob replied.

"An' me not bein' hard ter describe I reckon yer had not much trouble in recognizing me. Yer see, I'm the only fat man on the ranch an' that's why they call me Slim. But I reckon we'd better be hittin' the trail or we won't get back afore dark. You wait right here till I get the team an' we'll pull freight. Yer see, I had ter hitch the bronks a piece down the street 'cause they ain't used ter the cars, but I'll be right back."

"Reckon we'll like that fellow," Bob said as soon as Slim was out of hearing.

"I do already," Jack agreed. "But he's sure a character, all right. Do you suppose he can ride a horse?"

"If they've got one strong enough," Bob laughed.

"Anyhow, there's not much danger of his feet dragging on the ground," Jack declared.

Meanwhile Slim was talking to himself as he strode down the street to where he had hitched the bronchoes. "Them fellers don't seem as bad's I expected. Mebby we can make real men out 'o 'em 'f they stay long enough."

The boys were sitting on the trunk when he drove up a few minutes later and almost before he had brought the bronchoes to a stand they had it on the back of the buckboard.

"They don't have ter be waited on, that's sure," Slim thought as he proceeded to rope the trunk fast and his opinion of them went up several points.

"How long will it take to drive out to the ranch," Bob asked.

"'Bout three hours."

"How about getting something to eat before we start?"

"Might get a plate o' beans down ter Jake's, but we'll have ter hurry."

Jake's was anything but an inviting place to eat to the boys, accustomed to cleanliness, and their first impulse was to tell their guide that they were not so

hungry after all but, fearful lest they might offend him or at least create an unfavorable impression in his mind, they said nothing. To their great surprise, however, the food was good, very good, in fact, and both declared that the beans were the best they had ever eaten. Perhaps a keen appetite was, in part at least, responsible for their decision.

The boys could see that Slim was in a great hurry to get started, so they made as quick a meal as their appetites would permit and soon they were whirling out of town in a cloud of dust, Bob on the seat with the driver, while Jack was perched somewhat precariously on top of the trunk behind.

"We'll change seats every few miles," Bob had promised him when he had insisted that he had just as soon ride there as on the seat.

For the first few miles hardly a word was spoken. Slim had made up his mind that he was not going to take a fancy to "the Eastern dudes," and he hated, above all things, to have to change his opinion. So he had answered "yes" and "no" to their questions and tried his best to be disagreeable. But it was contrary to his nature and little by little he forgot his predetermined role and, as Jack told Bob a little later, began to thaw out. So by the time they were half-way home they were talking freely and Slim had been obliged to acknowledge to himself that they didn't seem so bad after all. Not that he had given

over his determination to have nothing more to do with them than he could help, unless it was to make their existence at the ranch so uncomfortable that they would cut short their visit as soon as it could be brought about.

"Are there many rattlesnakes out here?" Bob asked after they had been a little over two hours on the road.

"Some."

"Big ones?"

"Some."

It had just occurred to Slim that he was not living up to his resolve seeing that he had been taking the lead in the conversation for the past few minutes and so he again began to answer in single words.

"How about Indians?" Jack asked.

"Some."

"Are they civilized?"

"Some."

"Some what?" Bob broke in.

In spite of himself a grin appeared on Slim's good natured face and the ice began to thaw again.

"Some Indians and they're some civilized."

"Do you ever shoot them?" Jack asked.

Slim turned his head with a sudden jerk. He had the notion that the boy was trying to kid him, but Jack's face was perfectly sober.

"Wal-l," he drawled, "yer know thayre under the

protection of the government an' they fine us two bits apiece for every one we shoot and that makes it some expensive as a sport so we don't shoot more'n about a dozen or so a day."

"I guess you didn't get me," Jack laughed. "I meant snakes, not Indians."

"Oh, snakes. Why bless yer soul, just day afore yesterday we shipped three barrels o' snake oil fer the second time in a week and there's about a spoonful ter a snake."

Slim's face was perfectly straight as he made the statement and Bob gave Jack a sly wink as a signal to swallow the story.

"They must be rather thick," he said soberly. "It's a wonder we haven't seen any along the road."

"Wal-l, yer see, it's a little late in the day fer 'em ter be out now. They mostly come out long 'bout nine o'clock in the mornin' and get back inter their holes afore the dew begins ter fall. Yer see, the dew gets their rattles wet and when they're wet they kinder stick together and don't work very well, in fact, yer can't hear 'em much more'n a mile away unless they're good an' dry."

"And how far can you hear them when they're in good working order?" Bob asked.

Slim looked at him a moment before answering. He was not quite sure that he was getting away with the yarn, but there was nothing in the boy's

face to indicate that he was not taking it all in good faith, so he answered:

"Wal-l, o' course, it depends some on the way the wind's blowing. I had a pet snake last summer an' we used him ter call the boys home ter dinner an' sometimes they'd be all of five mile away, but o' course, him bein' a pet, we couldn't make him rattle very hard, 'cause they do that only when they're good an' mad."

"My but it must be pretty dangerous around here," Jack suggested.

"All depends on how quick yer are at dodging 'em. Yer know they can't jump more'n 'about twenty feet."

"But I always thought that a rattlesnake could only jump about its own length," Bob said. "You don't mean that they grow twenty feet long, do you?"

"Twenty feet ain't nothin'."

"How long was the biggest one you ever saw?" Jack asked.

"Wal-l, I can't exactly say as ter that, but it was some more'n twenty feet, 'cause he was going inter his hole an' I only saw the last thirty feet or so."

Bob winked at his brother again and Jack said without a trace of doubt in his voice:

"That must have been some snake."

For a few moments there was silence, then Bob,

thinking it would be a good plan to change the subject, said:

"Is the soil rich out here?"

"Soil rich! I 'spect we've 'bout the richest soil in th' world out here. All yer have ter do is ter stick something in the ground and it'll grow, all right. Yer can raise anything out here, that is, most anything 'cept pumpkins."

"And what's the matter with them?" Jack asked soberly.

"Wal-l, yer see, the soil's so rich that the vines grow so almighty fast that it wears the pumpkins all out draggin' 'em over the ground."

"That's too bad," Jack declared, "but can't they hitch an anchor or something of the sort to them and slow up their speed a bit?"

Slim gave Jack a searching glance as he asked the question. He was still a trifle uncertain as to just how far he was getting away with his yarns. But the glance evidently reassured him, for he went on:

"Wal-l, I dunno. One fellow tried hitchin' one of 'em to a tree with a lariat rope but, laws sakes, it didn't do no good. Busted the rope like it was a burnt thread an' he give it up."

During the last half hour they had been climbing a long hill and now, as they reached its top, a scene of surpassing beauty stretched out before them. 'A'

broad expanse entirely hemmed in by lofty hills reached for miles, beginning, as it seemed, almost at their feet.

"Thar's the Lazy S," Slim announced, pointing toward a set of buildings located near the center of the basin.

"It's sure pretty," Jack declared. "How big is the ranch?"

"'Bout ten thousand acres more or less ter the ranch itself, but the cattle range a lot farther'n that."

"Some farm," Bob muttered.

The bronchos had been inclined to lag coming up the long hill but now, as though they realized that home was near and supper waiting for them, seemed imbued with new life and Slim had his hands full to hold them as they swept down the mountain and around sharp curves at a pace which, more than once, made the boys catch their breath. Bob especially, who at the time was riding on the trunk, was obliged to cling on with both hands to the back of the seat. Several times he was on the point of asking if they were not going faster than was safe, but the thought that the cowboy would think that he was frightened, restrained him and he gritted his teeth and hung on. But he breathed a sigh of relief when they reached the bottom and swung out onto the plain.

It was about an hour later when they drove into

the yard of the ranch house, a long one-story building with a broad porch reaching across the entire front. A tall gaunt man, his lean face tanned to the color of brown leather, rose from the low chair, as they drove up.

"Just in time for supper," he greeted them as he stepped from the porch and reached out a hand to each of them.

"This is Mr. Stebbins?" Bob asked as he grasped the hand.

"At your service," the man smiled, "though I'm better known as Jeb around these parts."

"We're very glad to know you and we want to thank you for sending the buckboard over for us," Bob assured him as he jumped to the ground.

"Oh, that's all right. Slim needed a vacation, anyway, and I don't suppose there's much about the country here that you don't know now," he grinned as he cast a searching glance toward the cowboy who was standing at the broncho's heads. "Slim sure does like to talk about the country and he's all right, unless he lets his imagination get away with him then you want to look out. Hope you haven't been stretching things, Slim," he added.

The cowboy turned his face away as he bent over ostensibly to examine one of the broncho's feet and muttered something in a tone too low for them to catch.

"I see," Jeb smiled as he began unroping the trunk, "you want to discount everything he's told you about five hundred percent and you'll probably get things about right."

"Supper's getting cold, Dad."

The boys looked up to see a girl about their own age standing in the doorway and, as Bob later confided to Jack, she was a sight for sore eyes. Her face, tanned a rich olive, bore a most engaging smile and her regular clean-cut features gave her a beauty which somehow seemed out of place in the rough setting. She wore a simple gingham dress, but it was spotlessly clean and fresh.

"This is my daughter, Sue," Mr. Stebbins introduced her.

Both boys felt the blood rushing to their faces as they acknowledged the introduction, but the girl greeted them with a grace which at once put them at their ease.

"The pump's out back and as soon's you've washed up we'll have supper," Jeb told them as he led the way into the house. "Musn't keep Charlie waiting," he cautioned them. "He's the chief cook and bottle washer here and if we don't humor him he's apt to get sulky and then it shows in his cooking."

Charlie, they learned a little later, was a Chinaman of uncertain age, who had been on the ranch for many years and they were not long in finding

that what he did not know about cooking was, as Jack declared, mighty hard to discover. Whatever else they did at the ranch it was evident that they did not stint themselves on food, either as to quantity or quality and, as the long ride had given them a keen appetite, they did full justice to the meal.

"Now, Sue, you'll have just about time before dark to show the boys around the place," Jeb said as he pushed back his chair.

"Righto," she agreed as she led the way from the room. "How long was Slim's rattlesnake to-day?" she laughed a moment later.

"Well, he didn't set any definite length to it," Bob smiled. "He said he only saw the last thirty feet of it as it was going into a hole."

"Thirty feet! Was that all? Slim must be losing his grip. Did he spring the pumpkins on you?"

"Yes, he told us they were the only things they couldn't raise out here," Jack smiled.

"Slim's really a dear," she told them, "but he does love to tell big stories. You mustn't believe only about half what he says, and you want to look out for Slats Magee. He's a dear, too, but he loves to play jokes on folks, especially strangers, and some times he goes a bit too far. Those two boys are a pair and you mustn't be a bit surprised at anything they do. Most of the time they're scrapping together, although they really think the world of each

other. But they'd never in the world acknowledge it. You won't be here long before Slim will tell you what a terrible desperado Slat's is and, from what Slat's'll tell you about Slim, you'd think he had committed every crime known to the law, murder included."

By this time they had reached the immense barn, larger by many times than they had supposed a barn could be, and they were intensely interested as their guide led them from one part to another.

"How many horses do you keep?" Bob asked.

"About forty, I guess. They're out back in the corral. We'll go out there after a bit, but first I must take you over to the shack and introduce you to the boys."

"How many are there?" Jack asked.

"Just an even dozen."

Several of the "boys" were pitching horse shoes while the others were watching the game and it was evident that an exciting match was in progress, for they did not see them until they were standing close behind.

"Boys, I want you to meet Bob and Jack Lakewood," Sue said suddenly, and the way the cowboys snatched off their hats proved to the boys that their fair guide was held in high esteem by them.

"This is Slat's Magee, and Slim you've already met. And this is Red's," indicating a tall, rangy

individual whose bright red hair was a constant source of fun to his fellows. "There's no use of mentioning last names, as they never use them and I doubt if all of them know what they are themselves, she explained as she continued.

"And this is Spike, and Stubby and Bleary and Shorty and Fats," indicating a man well over six feet and so slender that Jack later declared that he could qualify as the living skeleton in a circus.

"And this is Big Foot and Freckles and Runt and last, but by no means least, Grumpy.

"He isn't really grumpy, you know, he only looks that way."

The "boys" acknowledged the introduction with good grace, but both Bob and Jack were aware of a feeling of hostility in the air which, however, they were unable to define. It was as though somehow they did not quite belong but were being accepted as a necessary evil.

"Now, we'll go look at the horses before it gets dark," Sue said, and the game of horse shoes was at once resumed. "You musn'd mind if the boys are a bit slow about warming up to you," the girl said. "You see, they're naturally suspicious of strangers, as we don't see very many out here, but as soon as they get acquainted they'll be all right and you'll find them as good a bunch as you ever met. Do you ride?"

"Some," Bob replied. "They teach cavalry at the military college we attended last year."

"That's fine. I'm crazy about riding and we'll have one before breakfast to-morrow morning if it suits you."

"Couldn't be better," Jack assured her.

Bob and Jack both loved horses and were fairly good judges of horse flesh, and they were agreeably surprised when they saw the beautiful animals in the corral.

"What beauties," both declared in the same breath.

"We think they're pretty good," the girl said and at the sound of her voice a splendid bay mare separated herself from the rest and trotted toward her.

"This is my mare and her name is Lady," she told them as she pulled a big lump of sugar from her pocket. "Lady always expects sugar whenever she sees me," she explained.

"And I'll bet she gets it," Jack laughed.

"That's right, isn't it, Lady?" And by a gentle neigh Lady declared that it was.

CHAPTER IV.

BOB "LEARNS HOW TO RIDE."

"I TOLD Slat's to bring the horses around in fifteen minutes, so if you want any breakfast you'd better get a hustle on."

The boys had just come from their room and as it was only a little after six o'clock, they were surprised to find Sue waiting for them. She was clad in a neat riding habit and looked very much like a handsome boy. She declared that she had had her breakfast hours ago, and chided the boys for being such sleepy heads. They finished the meal well within the specified time and found her waiting for them on the porch. At the same time Slat's appeared leading three horses.

"Where did that horse come from?" Sue asked pointing to a large vicious-look roan.

"Jeb bought him along with three others yesterday," the man replied.

"Well, why in the name of common sense, didn't you bring one that you knew was all right? What do you know about that horse? He looks as though he might be a killer."

"He needed exercise and I reckoned he'd be all right, but, of course, if they're afraid of him I can take him back and get Betsy. She's safe enough, I reckon. "

Something in the man's voice told Bob that he was offering him a dare and that he would be thought a coward if he refused it, so he said :

"Don't bother. I'll ride him."

"Not so you'd notice it," Sue said. Then, turning to Slats, she ordered :

"You get White Foot and make it snappy."

Slats turned to obey but not before he gave Bob a look which made him determined to ride the horse at any cost.

"Please let me have him."

"You mean it?"

"Sure thing."

"All right, then. Your blood be on your own head."

As Sue had said, the horse had a bad look about the eyes and Bob knew horses well enough to realize that he was probably in for a bad half-hour, but, like most boys of spirit, he hated to take a dare.

"You be careful, now," Jack whispered as he stepped to the side of the horse.

"You bet I will," he replied, then, turning to Slats, who was holding the horse by the bridle, he asked :

"What's his name?"

"Satan."

It seemed to Bob that there was a note of exultation in his voice as he spoke the name but he thought that, perhaps, it was only his imagination. Grasping the pommel of the saddle he vaulted lightly to the seat and grasped the reins.

Now, Bob was an excellent rider, but here he was at a disadvantage owing to the fact that he had always used the English saddle and this one was of the Western type with a high horn in front. Then the stirrup straps were all of two inches too long and he had no time to adjust them for Slats, let go the bridle, as soon as he was in the seat. For an instant Satan stood perfectly still as though trying to make up his mind what to do first. Then he turned as if on a pivot and with a suddenness which all but unseated the boy.

"That horse has never had a saddle on before," Sue declared angrily.

"Yes, he has, too," Slats replied. "Grumpy rode him last night."

He did not add that, in spite of Grumpy's experience riding bad horses, he had been thrown three times.

"Well, if he gets hurt you'll hear from me," Sue threatened him.

Meantime, Satan, having failed in his first attempt to unseat his rider, was trying other tricks. Buck-

ing and leaping high in the air and coming down stiff-legged, having failed to accomplish his purpose, he finally succeeded in getting the bit between his teeth and started for the corral.

"Gee, but he can ride," Sue cried clapping her hands.

"If those stirrups were the right length he'd be all right," Jack said. "But as they are they're not much use to him."

"He shore is some rider," Slat's acknowledged generously.

Bob, realizing that he must get control, in a measure at least, before the corral was reached, was tugging at the reins with all his strength and succeeded when only a few feet from the fence. Then Satan stopped with a jolt which nearly threw him over the pommel. Maddened at this last failure, Satan next tried standing on his hind legs. Up he rose until he was standing nearly vertical. Bob leaned as far forward as possible, sorely tempted to grab hold of the horn of the saddle, but he had read that "pulling leather" was as good as acknowledging defeat, so he kept his hand away and clung to the reins.

"He's going over backwards," Sue gasped.

She was right. Satan, whether by intention or otherwise, lost his balance and came down with a crash on his back. But Bob had thrown himself

from the saddle in time to escape being caught and, as the horse scrambled to his feet, he was again in the saddle before he had a chance to bolt.

"All ready for the next one," he cried as he dug his spurs into Satan's ribs.

It was the first time he had used the spurs and, for an instant, the horse seemed too much surprised to move.

"Go on, start something," Bob shouted just as Satan began to buck again.

Up and down he went and for several minutes Bob had all he could manage to keep his seat, but he stuck to it and finally the horse, now breathing heavily, stopped bucking and stood still.

"Next," Bob tried digging in the spurs again.

This time Satan again got the bit between his teeth and started for the open prairie. Bob did not try to free the bit this time but let him run.

"He's going to win out sure as shooting," Sue cried, again clapping her hands.

"He's a plucky kid, all right," Spike, who had joined them, declared.

"And some rider," Fats agreed. "I shore never saw anything pruttier than the way he sidestepped him when he went over back."

It was nearly an hour later when Bob returned riding a thoroughly subdued horse. Out on the broad prairie they had fought the last of the battle

and finally, covered with sweat and with sides heaving as he painfully expelled the breath from his nostrils. Satan had realized that he had found his master. After that Bob had dismounted and, standing at his head, had talked soothingly the while he stroked the beautifully shaped head.

"Now, then, old boy, you and I are going to be chums," he told him as he gave him a lump of sugar which he had slipped into his pocket that morning. "And there'll be no more spur work," he added.

Although beaten Satan was not yet entirely ready to acknowledge full allegiance to his new master, but Bob continued patiently to talk and little by little the trembling lessened and at the end of fifteen minutes after he had dismounted, Satan was nosing his shoulder in complete surrender. Then Bob rode him slowly back to the house.

"You did it! You did it!" Sue cried as he came within speaking distance. "Oh, it was wonderful and now he'll always love you."

"I reckon we'll get along all right now," Bob said modestly as he slipped to the ground. "And isn't he a beauty? And run, why that horse can almost fly."

"Well, son, you did a good job and he's your personal property as long as you stay here," Jeb, who had come from the barn as Bob rode up, declared.

"Thank you, sir. I wouldn't ask anything better," Bob assured him.

A week passed. Every day the boys had taken long rides with Sue and sometimes her father had accompanied them. Satan had proved all that Bob hoped and was devoted to his master. Jack had been allotted a splendid mare named Midnight, as she was as black as coal, and almost as fleet as Satan. The cowboys on the ranch were gradually thawing out, as Sue called it, having learned that the boys were not at all "stuck up" as they had expected. Bob, especially, they had accepted almost as one of themselves, his horsemanship having paved the way to their hearts. Slim had even acknowledged that "mebby that rattler wasn't more'n about twenty feet long" and Slats had even gone so far as to confess that giving him Satan to ride had been a put-up-job on the part of the whole gang.

"But you rid him, dog on my boots if yer didn't, an' it was a job as I would'd hated ter tackle," he grinned.

Sue was a fearless rider and many a race had they had, but Satan was too swift for the other horses, although both ran him a close second.

"I believe that horse of yours can outrun anything on four legs," Jack said at the close of a long race as Bob waited for them to catch up with him.

"Shouldn't wonder if you're right," he agreed.

They had been at the ranch eight days and had begun to feel themselves a part of it when Jeb, returning from a trip to Cold Springs, entered the dining room just as they were sitting down to supper. From the look on his face Sue knew at once that something was worrying him.

"What's the matter, Dad?" she asked.

"Who said anything was the matter?" Jeb smiled.

"Your face did. Come out with it. You know you can't fool me."

"Don't I, though?" he smiled. "Well, it's the Hains gang again."

"Red Hains?"

"Yes."

"But I thought he had left the country."

"So did I, but if he did it seems that he's back again. I met Bob Fisk over at the Springs and he said that he lost most a hundred head day before yesterday. Fisk owns the ranch next to us, just over the hills to the right," he explained to the boys.

"But how did he know that it was Hains?" Sue asked.

"Well, of course, he couldn't swear to it but he and his gang were seen about a week ago just over the border and they were heading this way. So it looks mighty like he was on the rustle again." Then, turning to the boys, he continued: "About three years ago a fellow by the name of John Hains, but

better known as Red Hains, organized a gang of cattle thieves and terrorized the country all about here. Posse after posse was organized to catch them but with no success. Several times we thought we had them, but every time they slipped through our fingers. They were a ruthless gang and did not hesitate at murder and more than a dozen men lost their lives hunting them, to say nothing of the thousands of head of cattle which they stole. For nearly two years they were active about here then, suddenly they disappeared and not a thing has been heard of them till the other day."

"Did you lose many?" Jack asked.

"Over a thousand head altogether and got off better than most of the other ranches."

"How far away is Fisk's ranch?" Bob asked.

"About twenty miles to the house, and about half that to where his land joins ours."

"And you think he may come here?"

"As likely here as anywhere else," Jeb said soberly.

"But how does he get away with that sort of thing?" Jack asked. "I mean, what does he do with all the cattle he steals?"

"Well, that's what more than one man around here would like to know," Jeb replied. "But he doubtless had a place somewhere up in the hills where he drove them. Then he would change the brands, blot them, we call it, and as soon as the new brands

were healed, he probably would drive them over the line into Mexico and sell them. Many a week have I spent along with others trying to find his hiding place, but, although we combed the territory with a fine toothed comb, so to speak, we never found it. Some of the old timers around here believe that he's in league with the devil and hanged if it didn't look very much like it sometimes."

"Did you ever see this Hains?" Bob asked.

"Once. I met him face to face on the trail up in the hills. I knew him right away from the descriptions I had heard of him. He's a big man, well over six feet and must weigh all of two hundred and fifty pounds. But his most distinguishing feature is his bright red hair which he wears long after the fashion of the old Indian scouts."

"And what happened?" Bob asked as the other paused.

"Well, as luck would have it, I had my gun in my hand at the time and when I saw him reach for his I knew that it was one or the other of us, so I fired point blank and him not more than ten feet away. Then the next thing I knew I didn't know anything. They found me several hours later lying in the trail and after considerable fussing finally brought me round. Seems that his bullet has creased my forehead and, seeing me drop from my horse, he had ridden off supposing that he had killed me. You

can see the scar now," he added, pushing the hair back from his forehead. "But what gets me is how I could have missed him at only ten feet and I'm considered a fair shot around here."

"Fair shot! He's won the championship eight years running. That's how fair a shot he is," Sue told them proudly.

"Was it possible that your gun missed fire?" Jack asked.

"Not a chance. I had filled the cylinder only a short time before I met him and afterward I found that one shot had been fired and, besides, I remembered hearing the report. No, I just missed him. It must have been one of those peculiar things which happen once in a while and which you can't explain. Nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand I would have had him, but the one time I missed."

"Is Hains a good shot?" Jack asked.

"Hains is a streak of lightning with a gun when it comes to the draw and he has a reputation of being a first rate shot. If my gun hadn't been in my hand at the time I wouldn't have stood a chance, as he could beat me to the draw and not half try. I see, you're wondering how he came to miss me or rather to only crease me. Well, I thought a whole lot about that and I can figure out two guesses. One is that he did just what he meant to do and the

other is that my shot either wounded him or came near enough to throw his aim off."

"And which guess do you favor?" Bob asked.

"Well, of course, I kind of like to think that I didn't miss him altogether, but I don't know. Sometimes I lean one way and sometimes the other."

"How large a gang does he have?" Bob asked.

"I don't know how many he's got now, but he used to have six or seven."

The conversation then turned to other things and nothing more was said about the cattle rustlers until supper was finished. Then, as he pushed back his chair, Jeb said:

"You folks better stick pretty close to the ranch for a few days at least till we see how things turn out. They may be hanging around or it may have been only a flying visit, but it's best to play it safe."

"Who's afraid?" Sue taunted.

"I am," her father replied soberly and the smile died from her face.

"You needn't be on my account," she said quickly. "I'll be careful."

During the evening Bob and Jack were conscious that the superintendent was worried, although it was evident that he was trying to conceal it. But he was uneasy, going out of the house and coming back at short intervals.

"Poor Dad, he worries more about those cows

than anything else in the world," Sue said a little before nine o'clock.

"Do you suppose there's any danger?" Jack asked.

"I expect so. Dad doesn't get all worked up for nothing."

But the night passed and nothing happened. Bob woke once during the night and fancied that he heard the murmur of voices just outside his window. He slipped quietly from the bed without disturbing his brother and crept to the window. But the sound had stopped and, although it was bright moonlight, he could see no one, and he went back to bed to fall asleep almost immediately.

At breakfast Jeb seemed more cheerful.

"To tell you the truth I expected a visit from those fellows last night," he told them. "I had the boys on the watch all night, but they didn't show up and I'm beginning to think that maybe it was only a flying visit and, perhaps, it wasn't Hains after all. Still, you'd better not get too far away from home," he cautioned them.

For three days they did not go beyond sight of the house. No further reports regarding the bandits reached the ranch and the worried look had nearly, if not quite, left Jeb's face.

CHAPTER V.

A SIDEWINDER.

"FEEL like a long gallop this morning?" Sue asked the boys at breakfast a few days later.

"Never felt more like it," Bob replied and Jack nodded assent.

"Where you going?" Jeb asked.

"I thought I take them over and show them the Owl's Head."

"That's quite a piece."

"Only a little over twenty miles. We'll take a lunch along and be back in time for supper."

"I'm afraid it's hardly safe," Jeb said slowly.

"Oh, bother. You don't suppose Hains and his gang have been hanging around all this time without doing anything. That's not his style and you know it. If he had been near here we'd have heard from him long before this."

"Probably you're right, but, for goodness sake, be careful."

"Surest thing you know."

"What's the Owl's Head?" Jack asked.

"Why, it's a big rock up in the hills and it's

shaped almost exactly like the head of an owl. It's really worth seeing. You aren't afraid, are you?" she asked.

Of course, both boys quickly assured her that they were not in the least frightened and she hurried to the kitchen to see about the lunch. They started an hour later shortly before nine o'clock. It was a beautiful cool morning, although a haze in the air prevented them from being able to see more than an indistinct outline of the hill some ten miles away.

"We'd better take it easy," Sue cautioned them as they rode out of the yard. "It's pretty hard climbing once we get to the hills and we want the horses fresh when we start on it."

She struck off at an easy lope, which any one of the horses could maintain all day, and they followed close behind. They had ridden for a little over an hour when she suddenly drew rein and stopped.

"Can you see anything that looks like a man over there?" she asked pointing in the direction they had had been going.

"There seems to be something moving there," Bob replied, shading his eyes. "How about it, Jack?"

"I see it, but it's too far away to tell what it is."

"Maybe it's one of the boys," Sue suggested as they started on again.

"How come we haven't seen any cattle?" Bob asked.

"They're all over on the south range now," Sue told him.

"Don't see anything of that fellow or whatever it was," Jack declared a half-hour later.

"No, he seems to have disappeared," Bob agreed.

Sue had been very quiet since they had seen the object and it just then occurred to Bob that she seemed a bit worried.

"What's wrong?" he asked pulling up close behind her.

"Nothing. Why?"

"You seem so quiet-like."

"Oh, I get that way, sometimes. I was just thinking."

"About that thing we saw?"

"Maybe."

"Think we'd better turn back?"

"How come?"

"Well, it's better to be careful, than sorry, you know."

"Oh, I dare say it was only a deer or something. Come on."

A short time later they reached the foot-hills and, after a short rest they started on the climb. It was not steep at first and a winding trail, only wide enough for them to ride in single file, made it easy

enough. But as they got higher it became steeper and the path rougher until the horses were obliged to pick a place for each step with the greatest care.

"How much of this is there?" Jack laughed, during one of their frequent stops to give the horses a breathing spell.

"It's about five miles to the top and it's another five down on the other side. But, cheer up, we've come nearly a mile and it doesn't get much worse than this."

"Let's be thankful for small favors," Bob laughed.

"Oh, I think it's fun," Jack assured them.

The hills were heavily wooded and in many places there was hardly more than room for them to pass between the trees, so closely did they grow on either side of the trail.

"Hark!"

Sue, who was riding a few feet ahead of Bob, pulled up her horse. "Listen," she said.

A sound as if someone was shaking dried peas in a pasteboard box was plainly heard.

"What is it?" Bob asked.

"It's a sidewinder."

"A what?"

"Why, a sidewinder."

"Guess you'll have to explain."

"Oh, I forgot. It's a rattlesnake. We call them sidewinders out here."

"Can you see him?"

"No, but he's right behind that rock just ahead."

As she spoke she drew a small but efficient appearing automatic from her pocket and touched Lady's sides with her heels. As the mare took a step forward the rattling sound became louder and, leaning over to one side, Bob saw an ugly head rear itself from behind the rock. At the same instant a sharp crack split the air and the head fell back.

"Got him," she cried, and they could hear a violent thrashing behind the rock.

"There may be another," Sue cautioned them, as she slipped from her horse.

She stood for a moment holding the reins in one hand and the gun in the other. "I guess he was a bachelor," she said as the sound of the writhing ceased and no more rattling was heard.

By this time the boys, too, had dismounted and, leading their horses, they followed her as she stepped toward the rock.

"All right, he's dead," she said a moment later and, stepping up a bit closer, they saw the snake stretched out at full length, which was not less than five feet and with a bullet hole through its head.

"Some snake!" Jack gasped.

"Some snake is right," Bob agreed.

"I'll bet he's a twin brother of that one Slim saw going into his hole," Jack declared.

"Not quite," Sue laughed. "But he is a pretty good sized one."

"Do they come any larger?" Bob asked.

"Well, I don't know's I ever saw but one larger. One of the boys killed one last year that only lacked an inch of being six feet and I've heard tell of seven and eight-footers, but I take them with a grain of salt."

"It would sure take some grain to digest that one of Slim's," Jack laughed.

With the aid of a stick Bob drew the snake out of the path and they remounted and started on again. Up and still up the trail led until Jack declared that they would be in the clouds if they did not get to the top before long.

"It's only about two miles farther," Sue laughed.

"It must be the top of the world, then" Bob declared.

It was just noon when finally they arrived at the summit. For the last hundred yards there had been no trees, nothing but rock, and the view was one never to be forgotten. Not far away, perhaps ten miles from where they stood, ran the Rio Grande, separating the United States from Mexico, and beyond stretched wooded hills as far as the eye could see.

"The first time I ever saw out of the United States," Bob said.

"Same here," Jack agreed.

"I've been here a number of times and have, of course, seen it, but I've never been over the line, or rather the river," Sue told them.

After enjoying the view for a few minutes they began the descent. After the first few hundred feet the trail was much smoother than on the way up and, as the slope was much more gentle, they made good progress and, in less than an hour had reached their destination.

"Here we are," Sue cried as she pulled her horse up and slipped from the saddle.

Following her outstretched hand with their eyes they saw the rock, perched at the top of a low cliff about a hundred yards from where they stood. As she had told them, it was an almost perfect image of an owl's head and for some moments they stared at it in wonder.

"Isn't it worth the trip?" she asked.

"It sure is," Bob told her and Jack declared that he would go twice as far to see it.

They remained there for an hour during which time they ate their lunch and allowed the horses to graze a short distance away where there was plenty of grass. They started back about two o'clock and had nearly reached the top when Sue, who was a short distance ahead of the boys, held up her hand at the same time stopping her horse.

"There's some horsemen coming up the trail," she said as they rode up. "Hear them?"

"They listened and the sound of iron shod hoofs striking the stones reached their ears.

"There's quite a number of them and I think we'd better get out of sight till they go by," she suggested.

"You think——" Bob began but she interrupted.

"You never can tell in this country. Of course, they may be all right, but then again, they may be all wrong."

While she was speaking she was leading the way to the right of the trail where dense bushes soon hid them from the view of anyone on the pathway.

"There, I reckon this is far enough," she said slipping from her saddle. "I don't believe they can see us here."

The boys dismounted and they stood there holding their horses by the bridles. They could soon hear the men talking and laughing as they came up the trail and, as Sue had said, it was evident that there were not less than seven or eight in the party.

"I'm going to try and get a look at them," Bob whispered, handing his reins to Jack.

"It'll be pretty risky," Sue told him. "But I would like to know who they are. But be mighty careful they don't see you."

"You bet I will," he promised as he left them and

crept through the thick brush back the way they had come.

He was obliged to hurry for fear they would pass before he could get to where he could see them, but he was used to passing noiselessly through the forest, having been taught the art by an old Indian up in Northern Maine, and not a bush moved nor did a sound betray his movements. The voices of the approaching party were rapidly becoming more plainly audible and by the time he had gotten as near the trail as he dared and had thrown himself at full length behind a convenient bush from where he had a fair view of the trail, they were close at hand. He tried to catch some of the words but was unable to get the drift of the conversation, as they were speaking Spanish and, although he had some knowledge of the language, they spoke too fast for him to follow it.

In a moment the leader came in sight, a big man, riding a dark brown horse. He wore an old black sweater and heavy corduroy trousers, while his head was covered with a broad-brimmed felt hat. Somewhat to his disappointment he noticed that the man's hair was coal black.

"That's not Red Hains," he thought. "Unless he's dyed his hair."

The leader was closely followed by a second man fully as large and dressed much the same except that

he wore a faded brown coat in place of the sweater. The rest of the party, six in number, were of much the same type but not one of them had red hair.

"That's about as tough-looking a bunch as I'd care to see," Bob thought. "But I guess it's not Hains' gang. At any rate, he's not with them."

The last man had come in sight when the leader stopped.

"There's been a party along here," Bob heard him say to the man behind him and he spoke English.

"What mak' you tink so?" his companion asked, and from his accent Bob knew that he was a Canuck.

"Don't yer think I've got eyes?" the black-haired man snapped.

"I tink you got ver' smart eye, you see dat."

By this time they were all bunched close together and Bob could see that the leader was pointing out to the others the signs by which he knew that someone had been over the trail.

"Not an hour ago," he heard him say.

"Then why didn't we meet 'em?" a man asked.

"Because they must have turned off the trail," the leader replied.

"Maybe they hide," another of the party suggested.

"Just what I was thinking," the leader said quickly. "And it's up to us to find out who they are and where they went. You stay here and I'll scout a bit."

Bob waited to hear no more but crept softly back the way he had come.

"There are eight of them and they're a pretty rough-looking crowd, but none of them has red hair," he told Sue and Jack as soon as he reached them.

"Have they gone on?" Sue asked.

No, the leader saw our tracks and is coming to look for us.

"You say it isn't Red Hains?"

"Not if Red Hains has red hair. This fellow's hair is as black as night."

"What we going to do?" Jack asked.

"There's only one thing we can do," Sue replied.

"And that's——?"

"Wait right here. You see, they'd be sure to catch us if we ran for it and that would only make it worse. Perhaps they won't find us but they probably will, and if they do, you let me do the talking."

As Sue had known it was not a difficult thing to follow their trail through the thick bushes, and in a very short time the black-haired man stood before them. He was on foot, having left his horse with the others.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am Sue Stebbins and this is Bob Lakewood and this Jack Lakewood. Who are you?" Sue showed no fear as she answered.

"Who I am don't matter," the man snapped. "What are you doing here?"

"Is it any of your business?" Sue asked quietly.

"If I choose to make it. I'm not alone," the man scowled.

"Well, then, we were riding," she told him.

"Riding where?"

"Home."

"Where's home?"

"About fifteen miles from here."

"The Lazy S?"

"Yes."

"Where you been?"

"To see the Owl's Head."

"Where's that?"

"Guess you must be a stranger around here if you don't know where the Owl's Head is."

"Maybe. But you haven't told me where it is."

"It's at the foot of the hills."

"What is it?"

"Why, it's a big rock shaped like an owl's head."

"And you came from the Lazy S just to see it?"

"Yes, but why all the questions? It's a free country, isn't it?"

"For some people," the man scowled.

"Well, it is for us, so we'll be going. Come on, boys." She gathered up her reins as if about to mount.

"Not quite so fast," the man snapped. "I've got another question to ask you."

"Well, make it snappy. It's getting late."

"Why did you hide when you heard us coming?"

"I thought you'd ask that. Suppose I don't choose to tell you."

"You'd better."

"Why?"

"Never mind why. You answer my question."

"Is that a threat?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, I don't like threats." Sue's black eyes snapped as she spoke and both the boys wondered what was coming next. "So I don't think I will tell you. Now what are you going to do about it?"

"I'll soon show you," and the man took a step forward, but Bob, unable to keep his hands off any longer, sprang in front of him.

"You keep your hands off her," he demanded.

"And if I don't?"

"I'll make you."

"You'll do what?" the man sneered.

"Try it and see."

The man hesitated a moment, and Bob wondered what was passing in his mind. It was hardly conceivable, he thought, that he was afraid of him, especially when he had his friends so near at hand. Perhaps it was something in the girl's eyes that

made him draw back. At any rate, he made no further movement toward her, and after giving Bob an angry look, turned and strode off without another word.

"Well, what do you know about that?" Jack asked as soon as he had disappeared.

"I thought I could bluff him," Sue said, "but if you hadn't stepped up to him as you did, I don't know as it would have worked," she added turning to Bob.

"Well, I'm mighty glad he let it go at that," Bob assured her. "I would have been a baby in his hands."

"I'm not so sure of that," Sue said with an admiring glance at him. "I'll bet you would have kept him busy."

"I'll say he would," Jack assured her. "Bob's some scrapper and knows how to take care of himself when it comes to a rough and tumble."

They waited as the sound of the men's voices grew more and more faint and when they could no longer be heard, Sue proposed that they start.

"I was afraid that they'd come back, but I guess they've really gone," she said.

They made their way slowly back to the trail stopping to listen now and then, but there was no sign of the men and, as soon as they reached the path, they started for home as fast as they dared urge

the horses. They had covered about half the distance down the other side of the mountain when Bob, who was in the lead, rounded a huge rock which hid the trail from view, and almost ran into a man, mounted on a roan horse. He was a man well over the average in size and had an abundant crop of long red hair: Red Hains beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Bob looked at the man for a moment too dazed to speak, and the big man returned the scrutiny, a cynical smile parting his lips.

"Wall, do yer see it?" he finally growled.

"I beg your pardon," Bob smiled. "You see, the surprise was so great that I fear I was a bit rude."

"Rude, eh, wall, I should say yer was rude, staring at a man like he was a wild animal. Whar yer goin'?"

"Down the hill."

"Don't yer 'spose I kin tell that much? I mean, what's yer destination? Is that plain?"

"Oh, you want to know where I live?"

"That's it."

"I live in Maine."

"Yer trying ter kid me?"

"No. You asked me where I live and I told you."

"Whar yer stoppin' now?" the man demanded in an angry tone.

"At the Lazy S."

"Now yer gettin' down ter brass tacks. Why didn't yer say so in the first place and save all the wind?"

Bob made no reply to this question and, after a moment, the man asked:

"Did yer meet some men a while back?"

"Yes."

"Whar 'bout?"

"Just over the top of the hill."

"Wall, if yer know when yer well off yer'll keep a still tongue in yer head 'bout havin' seen them an' me, too," the man threatened as he started his horse and pushed past them.

"That was Red Hains," Sue said as soon as he was out of hearing.

"I reckon there's no doubt of it," Bob agreed.

"And those others must be his gang," Jack added.

"Surest thing you know," Bob assured him.

"Well, he sure does look the part," Sue declared with a shrug of her shoulders. "I wish they could catch him."

"A consummation devoutly to be desired," Bob smiled. "But I imagine he's a pretty slippery customer."

"You said it," Sue affirmed.

"Do you suppose his hiding place is anywhere in these hills? I mean the place where he hides the cattle he steals," Jack asked.

"It's more than likely," Sue replied. "You see, it's only a few miles to the border and he'd naturally choose a place not too far from the line so that he wouldn't have to drive them very far."

"It seems likely," Bob agreed. Then, after a moment's pause, he said: "I've an idea. Jack, you ride home with Sue and I'll follow that fellow a bit and who knows but I may find out where they hang up."

"Not on your life," Sue objected. "Boy, you don't know what you'd be up against. It's not like your Maine woods where you know your way around. Besides, they're bad men, who would think no more of killing you than they would of shooting a steer."

"But I wouldn't let them catch me," Bob argued.

"Maybe not, but then again they might. They know this country and you don't and that gives them a big advantage."

"But think of the opportunity. They are probably on the way to their hiding place and there may never be so good a chance again. Its worth the risk."

"No, it isn't. Remember, I'm responsible for you till we get back to the ranch."

"But I'll be mighty careful and won't go far."

"Suppose you get lost?"

"Not a chance. You see, I couldn't get lost on

these hills, as all I'd have to do would be to keep on down hill till I got to the bottom and then I'd be out of the woods."

They argued the matter for some moments and finally Sue gave a reluctant consent, although Jack shook his head and urged him to go on with them. But Bob declared that it would be almost criminal to let such a chance slip, and after a while he, too, gave in.

"But you be home before dark," was Sue's final command as they started off again.

"Sure thing," Bob agreed as he turned his horse up the trail.

CHAPTER VI.

BOB CAPTURED.

"MAYBE I am doing a fool thing," Bob thought as he urged the horse up the rough trail. "One thing's dead sure. I've got to be mighty careful, because I'm up against a bad bunch and no mistake."

For a half-hour he pushed on as fast as he dared urge the horse, stopping to listen every few minutes. But no sound, save the rustle of the tree-tops as they swayed in the light breeze, came to him. Whether or not he was gaining on the man he could not tell, but he had seen no sign of him when he reached the top of the mountain.

"He must be making good time," he thought as he paused to allow Satan to get his breath. "I wonder how far they'll follow the trail." Then the thought struck him that he was doing a very foolish thing to expose himself there where there were no trees to hide him from view and he at once started to follow the trail down the other side. "I must keep my eyes open for a side trail," he thought a few minutes later as he again plunged into the thick forest.

He had gone, perhaps, a mile from the top when his eye caught sight of a narrow path running off toward the north. The place where it branched off the main trail was just beyond a huge pine tree and was so well hidden that, had he not been on the watch for just such a thing, he would never have seen it.

"Now I wonder," he mused as he drew rein. Then he slipped from the saddle and closely scrutinized the entrance to the narrow path. There had been no rain for several weeks and the ground was very hard and dry, but his knowledge of woodcraft stood him in good stead and he had little trouble in reading that several horses had turned off there not long since. The pathway was so narrow and filled with rocks that it seemed to him almost impossible that a horse could traverse it, and, after a moment's thought, he decided to leave Satan there and follow the new path on foot.

He led the horse into a deep thicket where there was little likelihood that he would be seen by any one passing along the trail and tied him to a small sapling. Then he plunged into the narrow trail jumping from rock to rock the better part of the time. He figured that he could probably make better time on foot than they would make on horseback, as they would be obliged to go very slowly or risk breaking a horse's leg. It got worse as he went along and

had it not been for unmistakable signs, which his trained eye was able to read, he would not have believed it possible that a horse could get over the ground.

"I must be gaining on them," he thought after he had covered what he judged was a mile from the main trail.

A moment later a rattlesnake gave his ominous warning only a foot or two in front of him as he reared his ugly head above a rock and the boy jumped to one side so quickly that he slipped from a rock and came down in a heap, giving his right foot a sharp wrench. The pain, for an instant, made him sick but he crawled hastily backward until he was several feet away.

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish," he thought as he stood up and tested his weight on the injured leg.

To his great joy, however, he found that it was only a slight sprain and that he could bear his weight on it without causing a great amount of pain. For a moment he seriously considered the advisability of giving it up and going back, but he was not made of the stuff that gives up easily and he determined to push on for a while at least. But another sharp rattle in front told him that an enemy was protesting his right of way. He had an automatic in his pocket and, as he was a good shot, he knew that there would be little difficulty in disposing of the

protestor were it not for the fact that the shot would be certain to alarm the men somewhere ahead of him.

"That would never do," he thought as he picked up a stone about the size of his fist.

The snake's head was out of sight as he straightened up but rose into view as he took a step forward. The distance was about ten feet and he hurled the stone with all his strength but, to his disappointment, he missed. But he was more fortunate the second time, the rock striking the snake's head fair and square. The head went down out of sight behind the rock and he could hear it thrashing about. He waited a few minutes then, picking up another larger rock, stepped cautiously forward. He had no way of knowing how badly he had injured his snakeship and, as the noise of the writhing had stopped, he judged that he had either killed it or else it was coiled ready to spring. So he tossed the stone in the air in such a way that it fell just behind the rock which hid the snake from his sight. It made no sound when it struck from which he judged that it must have landed on the snake. He waited a moment longer and, hearing nothing, judged that the snake must be dead. So he stepped nearer until he could see over the rock.

The snake was dead, its head mashed to a jelly by the second rock which had landed fairly on it.

It was a large one, fully as long as the one Sue had shot earlier in the day.

"I'm going to keep those rattles," he said to himself as he drew his knife from his pocket and cut them off.

He could not make quite so fast time now as he was obliged to favor his leg which now gave him considerable pain when he bore his weight on it.

"If I don't meet up with something before long I'll have to give it up, as I promised to turn up before dark," he thought as he pulled out his watch and noted that it was nearly four o'clock. "If I don't strike something in another half-hour I'll turn back. That'll give me time to get back before dark, I guess."

It was about twenty minutes later when the sharp crack of a rifle brought him to a quick stop.

"That wasn't very far away," he thought as he listened.

Then, a moment later he heard the sound of a man's voice off to his right. He was unable to distinguish the words although, from the sound, he could not be far away. The forest was very dense and he felt sure that he could creep fairly close to them without running much risk. So he turned from the path and, moving with extreme caution, crept from tree to tree, listening all the while. Soon he heard the voice again and now it was nearer, so

near, in fact, that he had no difficulty in hearing what he said.

"It's about time Red was gettin' here, don't you think?" the voice asked.

"He'll get here all right, give him time," a second voice replied.

"Wall, I don't like him bein' so confounded long 'bout it," the first voice growled.

"Aw, yer always a stewin' 'bout somethin' or other. Why don't yer take things easy like I do?" a third voice broke in.

All the time the boy was creeping nearer until finally, peering out from behind a thick clump of bushes, he could see the men sitting beneath the limbs of a large tree while their tired horses were hobbled only a few feet away. To his disappointment there was no sign of any place which would serve as a hiding place for stolen cattle. He watched for a few minutes and then, judging that he had probably learned all that he could and that he would have barely time to get back to the ranch before dark, he got carefully to his feet and was about to start when, suddenly a pair of powerful arms were thrown about him and he was borne to the ground. He realized at once that it would be useless to resist, so he kept quiet and after a moment the man seized him by the collar and jerked him to his feet.

"So it's you, eh," he said roughly.

"It would seem so," Bob replied quietly.

"Perhaps yer won't be quite so fresh in answerin' my questions now."

Bob made no reply and the man asked:

"What yer doing here?"

"I guess it's plain enough," Bob replied.

"It's plain enough ter me that you were spying on us."

Bob knew that it would be useless to deny the obvious fact, so he said nothing.

"Can't yer speak?" the man growled.

"I can, but what's the use?"

"I guess yer're right thar. I caught yer red-handed, so ter speak. But come on an' we'll see what the rest of the gang think about it."

Still keeping his great hand on Bob's collar he half-dragged and half-led him to where the others were waiting.

"What yer got thar, Red?" one of them called as soon as they came in sight.

"Name it an' yer kin have it," Hains laughed. Then as he came into their midst, he continued:

"I caught this feller a piece back thar watchin' of yer. What'll we do with him?"

"Why, that the same boy that was with the girl and other boy we found back a little way off the main trail."

Both because he used better language than the

others and by his black hair and beard, Bob recognized the speaker as the man who had found them earlier in the day.

"So you met 'em?" Hains asked.

"Yes, and believe me the girl was as pretty as a picture and she had some tongue, believe me."

"An' I 'spose that on account of her prutty face yer let 'em go," Hains snapped.

"Not exactly on account of that," the man replied.

"But there didnt seem any reason not to."

"I 'spose not, but how 'bout this feller? Want me ter let him go?"

"That's a different thing entirely," the man said.

"He was caught spying on us and that makes a difference."

"I'll say it does, a heap of difference," one of the other men broke in.

"Wall, boys, what'll we do with him?" Hains demanded.

"Give him a necktie party," one proposed.

"String him up," another shouted.

"Aw jest put a bullet whar it'll do the most good," a third suggested.

Bob was scared. He knew that he was in the hands of desperate men, men who would stop at nothing if they thought their safety was threatened, and his heart sank as he heard the suggestions from the different members of the band. How he wished

he had listened to Sue and his brother and was safe back at the ranch.

"He's only a kid," suggested the black-haired man.

"But he big enough ter tell what he's seen," another declared.

"Sure he is, but what has he seen?"

"He's seen us, ain't he?"

"And so have a lot others."

"Aw, what's the use o' arguin' 'bout it. I'll do the trick," a man who had not spoken before, said as he drew an ugly-looking revolver from his belt, and Bob gave an involuntary shudder.

"Hold on thar, Tim," Hains ordered and the man replaced the gun, growling something which Bob did not catch. "Let's get supper first an' then we'll tend ter him. Now, kid, you stay put righ thar and if yer try to get away yer'll get a bullet that'll stop yer. Get me?"

Bob did not doubt that the man meant exactly what he said and he sank down on a rock with a sigh which he could not repress. Not that he had given up hope, but he could not help feeling that his situation was desperate in the extreme. Perhaps after all, he thought, the men were only trying to scare him. He tried to force himself to believe that such was the case but got little comfort from the hope. Closing his eyes for a moment he breathed

a silent prayer for protection and, somehow, after that he felt better.

By this time the men had a big fire going and all were busy getting ready the meal except Hains and the black-haired man. They were talking earnestly together a little apart from the rest, and it seemed to the watching boy that the black-haired man was urging the other to some course of action. But, if so, it appeared that his argument was not meeting with much success, for Hains frequently shook his head and finally turned away and went to where the horses were hobbled and carefully looked each one over as though to satisfy himself that none could wander away.

The entire party seemed, for the time at least, to have forgotten all about the boy, for no one paid the slightest attention to him. He watched them carefully and, had it not been for his injured leg, he told himself, he would have made the attempt to slip away into the dense woods, trusting that he might get enough of a start before he was missed to enable him to escape.

But hampered, as he knew he would be, with the sprain, he dared not risk it. So he waited as patiently as possible, wondering what the outcome would be. Finally the supper, consisting of lamb, which they had roasted over the fire, potatoes and hot coffee, was ready and the men began to eat

hungrily, still completely ignoring him. Again he was minded to attempt to get away, but the fear of the injured leg again held him back. He pulled out his watch and saw that it was well past six o'clock and he began to feel hungry.

After what seemed a long time, one of the men, at an order from Hains, came to him bearing a good-sized hunk of meat and a couple of potatoes on a piece of birch bark, and a tin cup about half-filled with coffee.

"Here yer are, Kid," he said. "Eat, drink and be merry, for ter-morrow, who knows."

He sat the food down on the ground and turned back. Bob picked it up and, although there was neither knife, fork or spoon, he managed to eat it all. The potatoes were a bit soggy, but the meat was good and he was surprised at the quality of the coffee.

"The fellow who made that coffee knows his job all right," he said to himself as he drained the last of it.

Greatly to his surprise the men, after they had cleaned up after the meal, continued to pay not the slightest attention to him, and soon dusk began to steal over the forest. He could see that a number of the men were playing cards on a blanket, which they had spread on the ground in front of the fire, while others, rolled up in their blankets, for it was

beginning to grow cool, were already fast asleep. Apparently it was their intention to pass the night there, and he began to wonder if, after all, it would not be best to make the attempt to escape. He could hardly suppose that they had forgotten him, but he could see no indication that they were aware of his existence.

He had seen neither Hains or the black-haired man since he had eaten and he wondered what had become of them. Were one or both of them concealed somewhere where they could watch him? If he made the attempt to get away would it be to give them the chance for which they were waiting?

"It's a toss up either way," he thought. "If they intend to put me out of business they'll do it sooner or later unless I give them the slip, so I don't know that I'd be much worse off even if I don't succeed. I'm going to make a stab at it just as soon as it gets a bit darker."

The game of cards evidently was getting more and more exciting and he could hear the men as they made their bids and often a violent oath broke from the lips of first one and then another as the card went against them.

Darkness settled rapidly and, a few minutes after he had made his decision, he was able to see only a few feet from where he sat unless he looked toward the fire.

"As well now as any time," he thought as, without making the slightest sound, he began to hitch himself farther away from the fire. He moved three or four feet and then stopped and listened, watching the men to see if they were aware of his movements. But the game went on with no abatement and foot by foot he increased the distance between them and him. At no instant would he have been in the least surprised to have felt those powerful arms close about him or even to have felt the impact of a bullet. But nothing happened and soon he felt that he was far enough away to get up and run for it. Although he was in the dense forest the trees were not very close together and there was little or no underbrush, which enabled him, even in the darkness, to make fairly good speed, and at the end of another ten minutes, he felt that he was reasonably safe, at least so far as they were concerned.

But he well knew that not yet was he out of the woods, either literally or figuratively speaking. Could he find his way back to where he had left Satan? He was not so sure that he could, but he thanked God that he had, at least, escaped from what had at, the time, seemed almost certain death. If he only had a flashlight, he thought as he slowed down his pace and began to hunt for the narrow trail which led to the main path. Once he found that he felt that he would be reasonably safe and he thought that he

was moving in the right direction but could not be certain. He knew how difficult it was to maintain a correct sense of direction in the woods, especially at night.

Soon he was sure that, had he been going in the right direction, he ought to have reached it and turned sharply to the left. He was walking very slowly now, both on account of the injured leg which was giving him considerable pain every time he stepped on it, and because he knew that should he cross it without being aware of it, the chances were that he would not find it, at least, until morning. For another fifteen minutes he pushed on and then stopped suddenly. Was that a shout he heard? He listened and almost at once the sound was repeated. Someone was calling and the shout was answered by another not very far away. They had missed him and were searching the woods.

A shudder passed through him as he thought what would probably happen to him if they again got him into their clutches. Another shout, which sounded only a short distance in front of him answered almost immediately from off at his right, made him realize that his enemies had him nearly if not quite surrounded. Unless he found some way of safety very soon he would be caught for sure. He could now and then see flashes of light as his pursuers made use of their electric torches. He had not the slight-

est idea of which way to go and, for a moment, despair settled on him. It seemed impossible that he could escape. Then as he took a step forward, his cap was brushed from his head by the limb of a tree. As he stooped to recover it, an idea struck him. Although it was so dark that he could see but a few feet he could tell that the tree in front of him was thick-branched and, in another minute, he was rapidly making his way toward the top. The tree was tall and he did not stop until he was so near the top that the trunk was only a few inches through. Then, straddling a limb, he crouched as close to the trunk as he could get and waited. He had done all he could and he breathed a fervent prayer that they would not find him.

As he crouched there he could hear the men calling one to the other and all the time they were coming nearer. Flashes of light stabbed the darkness but, so dense were the branches beneath him, he only caught an occasional glimpse like the gleam of a firefly. Soon he was aware that two of them had met directly beneath him, and strained his ears to hear what they were saying,

"I told Pete to keep an eye on him," were the first words he could distinguish, and he thought it was Hains' voice.

"I guess Pete got too much interested in his cards," the other said.

"Wall, I'll larn him ter get mixed up with other things when I tell him to do sumpin'."

"I wouldn't be too hard on Pete, Red. The kid isn't worth it and after all, what does it matter if he does get away. It's already known that we are in the country and what he could tell wouldn't hurt us any."

From the language as well as the voice Bob knew that it was the black-haired man talking. He was the only one in the gang who, so far as he had heard, used decent English and he wondered how the man came to be associated with such a crowd.

"Taint't that I mind the kid so much, but it's the principle o' the thing that makes me mad. Long's I'm boss they've got to mind what I say."

"That's right so far as it goes, but I warn you that you'll make a big mistake if you go to rubbing Pete the wrong way just now. He doesn't like you any too much and the all the boys do like him. First thing you know he'll get the drop on you and then your rule will be over."

"Aw, what yer givin' us? I tell yer I kin handle a dozen Petes and any o' the rest of 'em, fer that matter."

"All right, have it your own way," the other replied nonchalantly. "But don't forget that I warned you."

At this moment two more of the gang joined them and Bob heard one of the newcomers say:

"I guess the kid's flew der coup."

"Looks like it," Hains replied in a sullen tone. "Where's Pete?"

"Dunno."

"Wall, I guess we might's well get back ter camp. 'Tain't much use huntin' round here in the dark."

Bob breathed a deep sigh of relief as he heard the men move off in the darkness. For some time he could hear them talking and shouting as they called to others of the gang. Gradually their voices grew fainter and soon all was still and he deemed it safe to descend. But when he reached the ground he found that he had entirely lost his sense of direction and had not the slightest idea as to which way to go.

"Guess the safest thing will be to stay right here till morning," he concluded after thinking the matter over for some time. "If I start out I'll be just as apt to blunder into their camp again as I am to find that trail."

A glance at the luminous face of his watch told him that it was nearly ten o'clock. The sky had clouded over and it was steadily growing colder, but he was dressed fairly warm in his woolen shirt and knew there was little danger of catching cold.

"I don't knew whether to chance it on the ground or to roost up in that tree," he thought as he groped

about on the ground to find a soft spot. Finally he found a place about twenty feet from the tree which he had climbed which was thick with dry moss and decided to risk it. His foot was giving him considerable pain and he quickly pulled off his shoe and stocking and felt of the ankle. It was pretty sore and he judged that it was swollen slightly, but he was thankful that it was no worse. For some time the ache in his ankle kept him awake but finally wearied nature asserted itself and he slept.

CHAPTER VII.

BOB MAKES A CONVERT.

IT was about five o'clock when Sue and Jack reached the ranch. Jeb was on the porch as they drove up.

"Where's Bob?" he asked.

Sue told him what had happened and he listened until she had finished the frown on his face getting deeper and deeper.

"And you let him do that fool thing?" he said as she paused.

"I didn't let him. He just did it. I told him not to and tried to get him to give it up," she replied.

"It was not her fault," Jack told him. "You see, when Bob makes up his mind to do a thing wild horses couldn't stop him and he was bound to do this so you mustn't blame her."

"But that was Red Hains and his gang you met," Jeb groaned. "If they catch him spying on them, good night."

"But they won't catch him," Jack asserted.

"How can you tell that?" Jeb asked quickly.

"I guess it's only a hunch, but I feel it in my bones

that he'll turn up all right. You see, he always does."

But the man was not convinced and the frown was still on his face as they led the horses toward the corral.

"I feel mighty guilty," Sue confided to Jack as they removed the saddles.

"You needn't. You did all you could to keep him from going."

"Just the same if anything happens to him I'll never forgive myself."

"Nor I for that matter," Jack agreed.

As they turned back to go to the house they saw two men riding in through the gateway.

"There's Slim and Slats and they seem some excited," Sue said.

That the two boys were excited became more apparent as, their horses reeking with sweat, they pulled up in front of the corral.

"Where's the fire?" Sue asked.

"It's worse nor fire," Slats asserted as he slid to the ground.

"Tell us quick," Sue cried impatiently.

"It's more cattle stealin', that's what 'tis," Slim declared as he undid his saddle girth.

"Where and when?" Sue was now fully as excited as the men.

Last night over at the Bar Z."

"How many?"

"Close onter 150, so Herb Walters told us. We met him 'bout five miles out."

"Do they think it was the Hains Gang?" Jack asked anxiously.

"Course it was. Who else could it been?" Slim looked at the boy with a glance of pity.

"But we met Hains and his gang up in the mountains along about noon," Sue told them.

"You what?" Both the men asked the question together.

"You heard me the first time, I said we met Hains and his gang up in the mountains.

"Well, of all the horned toads," Slat's began but Slim interrupted.

"Where was they goin' at?"

"You'll have to ask Bob that when he gets back."

"Gets back from where?"

"I don't know where. He insisted on following them to see if he could learn where they were going."

"Was he tryin' to commit suicide?"

"Do you think there is much danger?" Sue looked from one to the other."

"Would there be any danger if yer held a side-winder in yer hand and invited him ter have a free lunch off yer?"

Jack turned pale as Slat's was speaking. "But he won't let them catch him," he protested.

"If he can help it, you mean," Slat's snapped.
"When did he aim ter get back?"

"He promised to get to the ranch before dark," Sue told them.

"Well, I hope he keeps his word."

While talking they had been walking toward the house and Jeb met them at the steps.

"What do you think of this fool move of Bob's?" he asked.

"Fool is right," Slim replied.

"Think we'd better go hunt for him?"

"If he don't show up afore long I reckon we'll have ter do it."

"Well, we'll have supper first. Any news?"

Slim told him of the raid on the stock at the Bar Z and Jeb looked very thoughtful as he finished.

"It's bad, mighty bad," he said. "It's only a question of a short time before it'll be our turn unless something's done."

"You said it, boss," Slat's agreed and Slim nodded his head.

Supper was a very quiet meal as no one seemed inclined to talk much each one being busy with his own thoughts. First Sue and then Jack would step to the door and look off across the prairie to see if Bob was in sight but each time a shake of the head announced their disappointment to the others.

"But it's not dark yet," Jack said as he sat down after his fourth trip to the porch.

"Not for nearly two hours," Jeb added.

As soon as the meal was finished they all three gathered on the porch and it is probable that not one of them took their eyes from the distant hills during the next half hour.

"We'll wait till seven o'clock and if he don't show up by that time we'll start," Jeb said as he started down the path which led to the 'shack' where the cowboys lived. "I'll tell the boys to get the horses ready and, if we have to go, we can pretty near get to the hills before dark," he added.

When the hour came and brought no sign of the missing boy they set out. Three of the men were left behind, much against their wishes, as Jeb did not wish to leave the ranch entirely unprotected. At first he refused to allow Sue to accompany them, but the girl pleaded so hard that she finally had her way, as she usually did, and of course, Jack would not hear to being left behind.

"We'll probably meet him before we get very far," Jeb said as they swept out of the yard.

"I hope so," Jack replied trying to make his voice sound cheerful.

* * * * *

When Bob awoke the sun was shining. He opened

his eyes slowly and, for an instant, wondered where he was. Then memory returned and he sat up.

"Well, I had a good sleep anyway," he said half aloud as he got to his feet.

Although his ankle still hurt when he bore his weight on it he was glad to note that the pain was considerable less than it had been the night before.

"Now if I can only find Satan," he thought as he looked about trying to determine which way to go. "Wonder if he's as hungry as I am."

Ordinarily the position of the sun would have told him which way to go but, inasmuch as he was not at all certain of the direction in which he had fled during the darkness, he could not be sure. So he determined that he would again climb the tree in the hopes that the view from the top would set him straight. The tree was a very tall one overtopping any other near by and, when he had reached the limb on which he had rested before, he had a good view over a considerable distance. But it all looked so much alike that he could pick out no distinguishing mark which was at all helpful to him.

"I'm pretty sure that the path is over that way," he said aloud, pointing toward the top of the ridge. "I must have crossed it in the darkness without knowing it."

Feeling reasonably certain that he was right he quickly descended and set off. He had not gone

very far when he came to a small brook running at right angles to the way he was going. The water was clear and cold and he was very thirsty but, although he welcomed the stream for the sake of the water, it caused him much uneasiness as he could not remember having crossed it the night before.

"I guess I'm lost all right," he thought as he straightened up after drinking his fill. However he was convinced that he was moving in the right direction in a general sense at least, in that the top of the ridge lay that way. "Perhaps this brook takes a sharp turn not far away and that may be the reason I didn't cross it."

And a few minutes later he was sure that he was right for he came to a small path leading through the woods.

"I'm all right now," he thought turning to the right and, with a light heart, he pushed on as rapidly as the injured ankle would permit.

For an hour he hurried along. The fact that the path seemed much less rough than it had been yesterday caused him much uneasiness, but he trusted that it was due to his imagination but, when a second hour had nearly passed and he had not struck the main trail, he was obliged to acknowledge to himself that it was not the path he had taken before.

"Guess there's only one thing to do and that's to get up to the top of the ridge and go down the other

side. I'm bound to come somewhere. Looking for Satan now would be like hunting for a needle in a hay stack," he thought as he came to a stop. "I ought to have known that this wasn't the right path."

So he turned off to the left and plunged into the thick forest. Once off the narrow pathway it was very rough going. The trees were so close together that it was impossible to keep in anything like a straight course and there was much underbrush through which, at times, he had literally to push his way. But Bob was a boy who did not easily get discouraged and, although he was tired and hungry, he kept steadily on never doubting, but that he would find his way out sooner or later.

He had been off the trail for about half an hour and had been climbing nearly all that time when he heard a shout. He thought it was off to his right and paused undecided whether or not it would be advisable to answer it. It probably was one of the boys hunting him but, then again, it might be one of the Hains' gang and he hesitated to take the chance. For several moments he listened, but the shout was not repeated and he started on again. In another half hour he had reached the top of the ridge but whether he was above or below the main trail he was unable to determine as, at that point, the top was heavily wooded. So, after a moment's thought, he decided that he had better go straight down trusting

that he would strike open ground and be able to get his bearings. It was now ten o'clock and he thought he ought to reach the foot of the mountain by noon.

"I suppose they're wondering what has become of me," he thought as he started off again. "If I only had something to eat it wouldn't be so bad, and it wouldn't make much difference what it was just so it was grub."

He had hardly started when he heard another shout and this time it was much closer but he did not dare venture to answer it. As before the call was not repeated but, as he stood listening, he heard the sound of something making its way through the underbrush and it was coming directly toward him. Was it a beast or a man, and if the latter, was he friend or foe? The boy glanced hastily about to find a place of concealment where he could see without being seen. But, as bad luck would have it, there seemed no such place at hand and the best he could do was to hide behind the trunk of a big tree. The man, for by this time he knew by the sound that it was a man, was close at hand and he could hear him breathing heavily as he stopped not ten feet from the tree. If only he dared peep out. But he knew that would be to risk discovery, so he waited hoping that the man would speak and that from the sound of his voice, he would be able to tell who he was. He did

not have long to wait for, almost immediately he heard him mutter:

"I dunno what in thunder Red wanted ter send me off on a wild goose chase like this fer."

"It's one of the gang," Bob thought and he feared that the man would hear his heart beating it sounded so loud to him.

"I'm jest agoin' ter take a rest here," he heard him say and was aware that he had thrown himself on the ground.

"I hope he doesn't rest long," Bob thought as he carefully shifted his weight onto the other leg.

But, although he moved with the most extreme caution, he was unable to avoid a slight rustling of leaves which evidently caught the man's ear, for he heard him start up and, a moment later he could hear him getting to his feet. Then he came directly toward the tree.

Knowing that further concealment was out of the question, the boy determined to put on as bold a front as possible and stepped out to face him, holding his revolver in his hand.

"Well, if it ain't the kid," the man said as he saw the boy. "Thought thar was sumpin' behind that tree."

"You thought right," Bob assured him. Then, putting as much indifference as possible into his voice, he asked: "Were you looking for me?"

"Laws, no," the man replied. "What made yer think that?"

"I just thought it possible," Bob replied easily.

"Well, put up yer gun, sonny. Thar's no need o' guns atween friends. I ain't a goin' ter hurt yer any."

Bob had recognized the man as one of those who had advised giving him a necktie party the night before and was not at all deceived by his friendly attitude. But he was a small man, not much over a hundred and twenty pounds, and he felt sure that if it should come to a fight he could hold up his end. So he slipped the revolver back in his pocket.

"Where were you going?" he asked indifferently.

"No where in particular," the man answered. "Whar you hittin' it fer?"

"I'm going back to the ranch."

"Oh."

For the moment Bob was looking the other way and, when he turned, he was gazing straight into the barrel of an ugly looking automatic.

"What's the big idea?" he asked quietly.

"Yer're easy you are," the man grinned.

"So it would seem. May I ask what you are going to do with me?"

"Yer'll find out soon 'nough."

"Good. I hate to be held in suspense."

"Yer may be suspended sooner yer think fer," the

man grinned. "But if yer try any funny business it won't be necessary."

"But why should it be necessary in any event?"

"That's our business. Now turn 'bout face an' start up the hill and mind yer step."

Bob knew that the time to start anything was not yet so he did as he was ordered without hesitation, but his brain was busy. He did not intend to be led back, or driven for that matter, to the Hains gang. He was only too well aware of the reception that awaited him, for he did not doubt for a minute but that the man had been hunting for him, and, as he trudged along, he was busy thinking how he get hold of his captor without getting shot. That the man would shoot him if he felt that his safety was in danger, he had not the slightest doubt. Then again, he knew that the quicker he acted the better chance of success he would stand because there was no telling how soon they might meet some other member of the gang.

Determined to act as soon as the slightest chance of success offered he watched his opportunity and it soon came. A large tree trunk lay directly in front of him and, instead of going around it, he climbed over it taking all the time he dared so that when he jumped down on the other side his captor was just pulling himself up on to it. He hesitated as though uncertain which way to go until he knew that the

man was standing up on the trunk ready to jump down. Then like a flash he turned and, catching hold of the man's ankles, gave a strong pull. The move was so sudden and unexpected that the man's feet were yanked from beneath him before he had time to realize what had happened, his gun going off as he fell.

Before he had time to recover himself Bob was on top of him and they were thrashing about each trying to get a firm hold on the other. Bob almost at once got a hold on the hand which held the gun and with a sudden twist sent it flying. Although the man was undersized he was wiry and the boy was amazed at his strength but, to his great satisfaction, he soon discovered that he knew nothing regarding the science of wrestling. All he had was brute strength while Bob was an adept. So, once the gun was out of the way he felt fairly confident. But the man was fighting like a wild cat and Bob had all he could manage for some moments to keep his hands away from his throat.

He hoped that his exertions would soon wind him but, as the struggle continued, there was no abatement of his fury and Bob decided that he had better take the offensive without waiting longer. He was underneath at the moment and with a sudden twist of his body he succeeded in throwing him off and, an instant later, he had a half Nelson about his neck.

Back he bent the arm until it seemed that the bone must snap, but the man continued to struggle.

"It'll snap pretty soon," Bob told him. "Better give up."

"All right, you win," the man gasped his face distorted with pain.

Bob immediately released his hold and sprang to his feet. For a moment the other lay on the ground rubbing his arm then he too got slowly up.

Bob was pretty certain that he had no other gun as he had taken the opportunity of feeling for it while they were on the ground, but he watched him closely ready to spring for him if he made a movement toward his pocket.

"What you call it, that hold?" he panted.

"That was a half Nelson."

"Half Nelson, eh. Well all I got ter say is that I'd sure hate ter run up against a whole one."

"It's pretty good when you know how to handle it."

The man had taken a step forward and, as Bob spoke, he suddenly aimed a blow at his head. Although Bob was on the watch for some such move, the quickness of it deceived him and the fist landed squarely on the point of his chin, and he went down. With an exultant cry the man sprang forward, but before he could reach him again the boy was on his feet. The blow, although a heavy one, had not

landed with its full force as Bob had drawn his head back in time and he had fallen more because of catching his heel on a root than from the blow itself. The man hesitated as though surprised at the quickness with which Bob had got to his feet.

"So that's the way you play the game," Bob said.

"What you mean play the game?"

"Why, up where I come from when a man cries quits he's done, that's all."

"But I'm not done yer'll find out in 'bout a minute," he snarled as he sprang forward.

Bob dodged the blow without any great effort and, as he lurched by from the force with which he had struck, he got in a clip behind the ear which almost but not quite knocked him over. The man recovered himself and returned to the attack with a snarl of rage. But Bob was ready for him and as he rushed he caught him fairly on the point of the chin. It was a heavy blow and the man went down but he was not knocked out and was on his feet almost immediately. Evidently he realized by this time that he was no match for the boy with his fists for this time he rushed at him head down in an effort to catch him about the knees. It was exactly what Bob had been hoping for and he set himself to meet it, and the next instant a very surprised outlaw was flying through the air over his head to fall with a thud all the fight and most of the wind knocked out

of him. It was a trick Bob had learned from the Jap teacher of wrestling at the college and it now stood him in good stead.

The outlaw writhed on the ground gasping for breath as Bob stepped up and stood over him.

"That's another good one," he told him, but he had not yet recovered his breath sufficiently to be able to speak.

Seeing that he was "hors de combat" for the present at least, Bob stepped a few feet away and began looking for the outlaw's gun. He knew the direction in which it had been cast, but it was some moments before he located it. When he returned the man was sitting up with his back against a tree but he was still having a hard time breathing.

"Getting your wind back?"

The man simply scowled in reply as Bob held the gun so that he could see that he had it.

"No use in being ugly about it," he told him. I'm the one who ought to be mad. You had two chances and you can bet your sweet life I'm not going to give you a third."

Bob was intending to leave at once being confident that the man would not dare to follow him now that he knew that he was armed, but something in his face made him hesitate. For the first time he realized that the outlaw was very young. In fact, as he sat

there he did not look much over twenty and a wave of pity swept over the boy.

"How old are you?" he asked kindly.

"I'll be twenty-one next month."

"And what's your name?"

"What you want to know that for?"

Bob was impressed by the fact that the outlaw was now using better English than he had been and was becoming more and more convinced that he had seen better days.

"No reason in particular," he told him.

"Well, it's Fred Royce if it'll do you any good to know.

"Then you're an American?"

"Sure thing, but I guess I'm not much of a credit to the nation."

"Do you like the life you're leading?"

For an instant the man did not reply and Bob could see that a struggle was taking place in his mind.

"Like it? Of course I don't."

"Then why not get out of it?"

"That's easier said than done," the outlaw said sadly.

"Would you mind telling me how you happened to get into it?"

Again he hesitated and Bob was surprised to see that tears were in his eyes. Finally he spoke.

"I suppose it's a common enough story. I lived in Boston and my father is rich. I had plenty of money but I got in with a fast set, got to gambling and, of course, lost. I didn't dare to ask father for the money so I forged his name to a check. It was only for a couple hundred dollars, but I realize now that it was just as bad as if it had been a million. Then a fellow in our crowd found it out and threatened to go to father and tell him about it unless I paid him ten thousand dollars. The only way I could get the money was to forge another check, but I didn't do it. I skipped and beat my way out here. That was a little over a month ago and I've had a pretty rough time of it. You see I never had to work and so don't know how to do anything. I tried a number of jobs but every time I got fired and I don't blame them for that because I know I made a mess of it. Then three days ago I fell in with this man, Hains. I was about starved at the time and he staked me to a good meal, the first one I've had for most a week. Well I was pretty desperate and when he asked me to join his gang I, like a weak fool, consented."

"Then you've only been with him a couple of days?"

"That's all, and I haven't had anything to do with stealing cattle, not yet. He said I have to wait awhile and learn the ropes before I'd be any good. Honestly I'm sorry I tried to double cross you, but

you see Hains sent me out to see if I could find out what had become of you and I thought if I could bring you in it'd be a big feather in my cap. But now I'm glad I got licked."

"So am I for your sake as well as my own."

There was silence for a moment and then the outlaw said:

"If I only dared to chuck it."

"Well, why don't you?" Bob asked kindly.

"You don't know that gang or you wouldn't ask. My life wouldn't be worth a plugged cent if I went back on them."

"But suppose I loaned you the money to go back home?"

"I couldn't go back, not yet. If I could make good first then I might have the courage to go back and face father but, as it is now, well, I just couldn't, that's all, but I'm mighty thankful for the offer just the same."

"See here, man, don't you realize that the farther you go with this sort of thing the harder it's going to be to break away. You ought to know that this kind has only one end. They'll get you sooner or later. Be a man and make the break now before the law has anything on you."

Bob spoke sternly and he could see that his words were having an effect on the man.

"Even if they should catch you it would be no

worse than what this sort of thing will lead to," he added in an effort to clinch the argument.

"I'll do it," he said after a moment's hesitation.

"Yes, yer will, not."

At the words a large, red-haired man stepped out from behind a tree.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RAID.

BOB knew at once that it was Red Hains and his hand moved toward his pocket.

"Keep yer hand away from that pocket if yer want to live any longer," Hains snapped.

Bob knew that, although the man had nothing in his hands, he was reputed to be a streak of lightning when it came to getting a gun out, so he prudently did as he was ordered.

"That's better, an' see that yer keep 'em away." Then turning to the other he snapped: "Wall, yer poor snivling apology of a half-baked man, what yer got ter say fer yerself?"

"Nothing," Royce replied sullenly.

"Nothin', eh. Do yer know I've half a mind ter put a hunk o' lead in yer, right now?"

"Go ahead, if it'll do you any good," Royce retorted.

"Yer think I'm bluffing, eh. Then take this."

As he spoke the man's hand moved with the quickness of a flash toward his belt, but before the gun was out a deep voice boomed out:

"Hands up, Red. I gotta bead on yer an' I'll drill yer if yer move."

At the first word Hains' hand had stopped and before the command was finished they were elevated above his head. Then Slat's Magee stepped into view.

"Real nice social little party we got here," he said keeping his gun trained on Hains. "An' will yer look at who's here?" he added motioning with his head to Hains.

"Gee, but I'm glad to see you, Slat's," Bob cried.

"An' I'm glad ter get ter the party on time," Slat's grinned.

At that instant the sound of a shot far off in the forest made them turn their heads and when they turned them back Red Hains was gone.

"What the——" Slat's began and then stopped short. "Now, what do yer know about that?" he finished sheepishly. "Whar did that skunk get to?"

"How could a man disappear as quickly as that?" Bob gasped.

"Well, I reckon mebbe it's good riddance ter bad rubbish, as the sayin' is. We'd a had a sweet time gettin' of him in. But who's this feller?"

"In a few words Bob told him Royce's story and the sympathies of the man were at once engaged.

"Sure, we'll look out for him. Don't yer fret, young feller. If yer want ter go straight, you're goin' ter get a chance an' don't yer fergit it. But I

plumb fergot sumpin'." And he pulled out his gun and fired three shots in rapid succession into the air.

"The boys been out huntin' fer yer all night and that's the signal if yer was found," he explained.

"It's too bad," Bob told him. "I ought to have known better than to have attempted it. But how far am I from the trail?"

"Bout five miles, mebbe a little more."

"So far as that?"

"Yep, and I reckon we'd better be makin' tracks. My horse is 'bout two miles back. Couldn't get him any further."

They started at once, Slats leading and the others following close at his heels.

"How did you know where to find me?" Bob asked after they had covered perhaps a mile.

"Didn't know. Jest went it blind."

"Well, I never was more glad to see anyone."

"Reckon not."

Soon they reached the place where Slats had left his horse and he insisted on Bob riding. But he refused as did Royce and the argument ended with them all going on foot, Slats leading the animal. It was about ten o'clock when they struck the trail not far from where Bob had left his horse.

"You wait here till I get Satan," Bob said as he turned down the trail.

But when he reached the place, a few minutes later, there was no horse to welcome him.

"He's either broken away or someone has stolen him," he thought as he examined the place where he had tied him.

The ground was considerably tramped up and the tree, to which he had been tied had been gnawed, but there was nothing to indicate which of his guesses was correct.

When he got back to where he had left the others he found that Sue, Jack and three of the boys had joined them.

"Didn't I tell you that you'd get caught?" Sue demanded as soon as he came in sight.

"Indeed, you did, and if I hadn't been a fool I'd have followed your advice. But never again," and he held up his hand as if taking an oath.

Royce's presence had been already explained and, after again firing the signal, they started for the ranch, two of the horses carrying double.

"I wouldn't care so much if I had accomplished anything," Bob confided to Jack behind whom he was riding.

"I should say you had accomplished a whole lot," Jack retorted.

"What do you mean? We know no more now than before."

"But how about Royce?"

"If he goes straight from now on I'll say that you did more than if you you had caught the whole gang."

"Maybe you are right."

"I know I am."

They reached the ranch in time for dinner and found that Jeb and one of the others had returned having heard the first signal and, at the time, having been nearer home.

"I'll bet I could eat a raw moccasin," Bob declared a few minutes later as they sat down at the table.

They had just started to eat when one of the men came in and announced that Satan had just come in by himself.

By the time they had finished the meal all the boys were back and Bob had to repeat his story several times. All were greatly interested in young Royce and he was almost overcome by the kindness shown him declaring over and over again that he did not deserve it. Jeb added his advice to that which Bob had given him, that he take money and go back home. But he said that he would do anything else that they wished but that he could not do.

"You don't know my father," he told them. "Oh, he's a good father and all that but he is absolutely merciless when it comes to a thing like this. He'd have me arrested and put me in jail in a minute if I went back to him like this. I know I deserve it and

if it wasn't for mother I'd be willing to face him and take what was coming, but it would kill her."

Tears had been gathering in the man's eyes while he was talking and by the time he had finished he was sobbing in good earnest.

"There, there, son, we all make mistakes and you shall have a chance right here to make good," Jeb assured him, laying a kindly hand on his shoulder.

"You're better to me than I deserve, sir," he sobbed, "but if you'll only give me a chance I'll try so hard."

"Then it's settled. You are on the payroll of the Lazy S."

"But you must not pay me anything, at least until I'm worth it."

"Well, we won't fight over that," Jeb told him kindly.

"It is something that I'll never forget and I'll make good."

"Of course, you will."

It developed that Royce knew nothing more about Red Hains and his gang than he had already told them. He had never been to their rendezvous and had no idea where it was.

"I don't think Hains trusted me fully," he told them, "and he, as well as the others, were careful not to talk about their business when I was around. Guess I was kind of on probation."

"But did you never hear him say anything about this ranch?" Jeb asked him.

"No, sir, I——. Yes, I did, too. It was last night, just before we camped. I was tending to the horses and he and one of the men were talking only a few feet away and I heard him say that the Lazy S had the best bunch of cattle in the country but that they were pretty well guarded and it would be pretty risky to try to run any of them off."

"Then you don't know whether he intends to try it or not?"

"No, sir, that was all I heard him say. They moved away then and I didn't hear anything more."

"Well, you'd better stick pretty close to the ranch for a while. I fancy it would go pretty hard with you if he should get hold of you again."

"He'd kill me."

"Probably he would."

The herd of the Lazy S was grazing on what was called the lower range, about two miles from the house. Jeb called all the boys for a consultation before supper and arranged that they should guard them in two shifts, each being on duty from six to six.

"There's little doubt in my mind but what he'll have a try at 'em sooner or later," Jeb told them. "He may get away with it, but we'll make it as hard for him as we can, eh."

"Sure, an' we'll do that," Grumpy declared, and all the others were just as enthusiastic.

"The finest and most loyal bunch of men I ever had," Jeb told the boys as the men left the porch.

"Which shift do we go with?" Bob asked.

"Why, you——"

"Sure, we're going to help. We wouldn't miss it for the world," Jack broke in. Jeb insisted that he was responsible for them and that there was too much risk attached to it, but they finally won a reluctant consent to join the day shift.

It was sometime in the night when Bob suddenly awoke. He was aware that he had heard something, but what it was he did not know, but a moment later he heard it again and this time he knew that it was a shot and it came from the south. Almost at the same time he heard someone moving in the kitchen out of which their room opened. He gave Jack a sharp nudge.

"Wake up, there," he whispered in his ear.

"What's the idea," Jack grunted sleepily.

"Something's doing. Come, snap out of it," he ordered, slipping from the bed and dragging Jack after him.

"Have a heart," Jack groaned as he bumped his head on the floor.

"Sorry, but we've got to make it snappy."

As they pulled on their clothes they could hear Jeb's voice out on the porch shouting to the men.

"Think it's a raid?" Jack asked.

"What do you suppose it is?" Bob retorted.
"Think they're indulging in target practice?"

"Not exactly, but——"

"Stop talking and get a hustle on," Bob ordered as he pulled open the door and stepped out of the room.

There was no one in the kitchen and he rushed out on to the porch where he bumped into Jeb who was about to come in.

"Is it Hains?" he asked.

"No doubt of it, I guess, but you boys keep out of it."

"But we want to go."

"Too risky."

"But we'll be careful and——"

But Jeb did not wait to hear any more for at that moment the men came up with the horses and he rushed into the house to come out again almost immediately buckling his gun-belt about his waist, Jack was close behind him, buttoning up his shirt on the way.

Bob made one more effort.

"Please let us go," he pleaded, catching hold of Jeb's arm.

"Who's that can't go?"

The one who asked the question was Sue and she was dressed in her riding suit and her small automatic was strapped about her slim waist.

"Nothing doing, this time, Sue." Jeb put all the command possible into the order.

"But——"

"No buts about it. This is no business for a girl."

"But——"

"Oh, well, I can't stop to argue any more. Come along, if you must, but you must stay well behind. Make it snappy, now, every minute counts.

The two boys took it for granted that the permission included them and followed Sue's flying feet to the corral. They were mounted and back with the others almost in no time.

"You keep well in the rear," Jeb cried as he gave the order to start, and he swept out of the gate closely followed by the rest.

In all, not more than ten minutes has passed since Bob heard the first shot and during that time several more shots had been heard. The night was dark, the new moon having set several hours before, and they could barely see each other as they rode. The shots were coming more frequently now and the pace set by Jeb was a fast one. But Bob was obliged to hold Satan in in order to keep behind the men, as he seemed imbued with the excitement.

"Fire into the air, boys, an' let 'em know we're

coming," Jeb shouted a few minutes after they had started and the next moment the air was rent with shots as the order was obeyed.

On through the night they swept the hoofs of the horses hardly seeming to touch the ground so swiftly were they running. A few minutes and they could hear the bellowing of the cattle as they milled this way and that not frightened enough to stampede but very restless.

In another minute Jeb called a halt and ordered the men to stay where they were while he went on to find out the condition of things.

"If I fire two shots close together and then two more after about ten seconds you come a-running, all except you, Sue, and the boys. You three stay where you are and if I shoot twice more quick-like, you beat it for the house. You can tell my gun from the rest."

As he spoke he melted into the darkness and they waited. Minute after minute passed and they were all getting impatient when the signal came.

"Come on, boys, whoop her up," one of the men shouted, and the three were alone.

"Gee, but I wish he hadn't told us not to go any farther," Jack declared.

"Same here, but I reckon he knows best," Bob said, stroking Satan's neck in an effort to quiet him.

"I can usually wheedle father into most anything,

but when he speaks like that I know better than to disobey. I tried it just once and that was a-plenty."

"Of course, we wouldn't think of not doing as he ordered," Jack told her.

No shots had been heard since the men rode off and they were beginning to wonder if it was all over when two shots rang out close together.

"That's dad's old Betsey and it means for us to beat it," Sue said as she turned her horse. "Come on and come a-running."

She took the lead and the boys followed. If they had come out fast it seemed as though they were flying now, and the lights of the ranch house loomed up almost, it seemed, before they were fairly started. Then, when they were about a hundred yards from the house when Sue stopped so suddenly that Jack had all he could do to keep from running into her.

"Look," she gasped.

One glance was enough. 'At one corner of the big barn a thin blaze of light gleamed through the darkness.

"They've fired the barn," Bob cried. "Come on, Jack, we must put it out if possible."

"Just a minute," Sue called as he was about to start. "We don't know how many of them there may be and we must be careful."

"But listen——" Bob began, but Sue interrupted.

"You got your guns with you?"

"Sure."

"Then we'll ride on firing as fast as we can, and they may think that the whole outfit is coming."

"Good plan," Bob agreed. "Come on."

He led and they rode rapidly directly for the barn shooting and yelling at the top of their voices. No shots answered theirs and they reached the barn without seeing anyone. The lower part of the corner was blazing fiercely and it looked as though the barn would surely go. But all three were determined that it should not if they could prevent it. Fortunately there was a pump only a few yards away, and Bob shouted as he threw himself from his horse:

"See if there's a bucket at the well, Jack."

Then he ran for the house where he knew he would find several. He knew that the barn was filled with dry hay and if the fire once got to it there would be no chance of saving it. He was back almost immediately with two buckets to find Jack pumping furiously into an old leaky pail. Throwing down the empty ones he grabbed the other shouting:

"You and Sue keep 'em filled."

A good part of the water leaked out before he could get to the barn and what was left seemed to have no effect at all and, throwing the pail aside, he rushed back for another. This one was filled by the time he grabbed it and when he had dashed the contents on the fire he was a little encouraged. Back

and forth he ran, but the fire persisted in eating its way into the dry timber and he feared that it was gaining on him. He had made over twenty trips and was about exhausted when, as he came back for another pailful, Jack shouted:

"Change places with me, Bob. You're about puffed."

Jack was comparatively fresh as Sue had been doing a part of the pumping and by the time he had made a dozen trips back and forth the fire was well under control.

"A couple more pailsfull and she'll be out," he panted.

"My, but it's lucky we got here just when we did," Sue declared a few minutes later as, the fight ended, they stood looking at the blackened timbers. "If it had got a bit more of a start it would have gone up sure as smoke."

"And in smoke," Jack laughed.

"What'll we do now?" Bob asked after a moment's silence.

"Have you heard any shooting since we got here?" Sue asked.

"No, but I reckon that doesn't mean that there hasn't been any. We've been so busy that I guess we wouldn't have heard it if a gattling gun had been in action out there."

"Listen a moment," Sue suggested.

But not a sound came to them and Sue soon declared that the raid must be over.

"I hope they didn't get away with any of the cattle," she added.

"What do you suppose they set fire to the barn for?" Jack asked.

"Oh, I imagine they were getting the worst of it and sent a couple of the men to fire the barn hoping that our men would see the fire and rush to put it out. Then they'd have the cattle to themselves. Or perhaps they just did it out of pure spite. They're bad enough to do anything."

"Had we better ride back?" Bob asked.

"I don't think so. The scrap must be over or we'd hear firing. No, I think we better go up to the house and wait till they come back."

"All right," Bob agreed. "But I'm going to take a look around first. You and Jack go up to the house and I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Yes, you will, not," Jack said quickly. "We'd have to spend the rest of the night and all day tomorrow hunting for you."

"Nonsense."

"No nonsense about it," Sue broke in. "If any of them are lurking around here they'd be sure to see you first and get the drop on you before you could do a thing. No, we'll all go to the house and sit

tight till the boys get back. We can keep an eye on the barn, but I hardly think they'll try it again."

Bob, knowing that he had come to grief once through not taking Sue's advice, did not insist further, although he felt that it was a risky thing to leave the barn unprotected. They found the horses where they had left them and turned them into the corral after taking off the saddles, and then returned to the house. They had still heard no shot and Sue declared that some of them, at least, ought to be getting back.

"That is, if they aren't off chasing them," she added.

"Do you think they'd do that while it is so dark?" Jack asked.

"Goodness, I don't know. There's no accounting for what that dad of mine will do once he gets started."

"Well, it'll begin to get light in a half-hour or so," Bob told them glancing at his watch.

The coming dawn was just beginning to lift the darkness when they heard the beating of hoofs.

"There're coming," Sue cried, leading the way to the porch, and in about ten minutes Jeb and two of the men swung themselves from their dripping horses.

"You all safe?" was his first question.

"Right side up and a yard wide," Sue replied.

"Good. They got young Royce."

"Bad?" Sue's voice disclosed her anxiety.

"Just below the shoulder. I don't think it went through the lung, but I'm not sure."

"Where is he?"

"Down by the spring. I thought it best not to try to bring him in on horseback, so we came in for the buckboard. Slim is with him and he ain't bleeding nothing to speak of."

"But the rustlers?" Sue asked.

"They got away with about twenty-five head, I reckon. Had 'em cut out before we got there."

"But couldn't you follow them?" Bob asked.

"Sure, we did as far as the woods. You see," he went on to explain, "we knew it would be plum suicide to follow them into the forest."

"Why?" Jack asked as he paused.

"Because the man who is being followed always has the big advantage in the darkness, as he pretty well knows where the other fellow is and all he has to do is to wait for him to get up close enough and then pot him, and I don't risk human life for a few cattle. But, believe me, we ain't done with that gang, not by a long shot."

Bob was about to ask another question, but just then the two men, who had returned with Jeb, drove up with the buckboard.

"Get a bed ready and we'll be back in about half an hour," Jeb said as they drove off.

"Oh, I do hope that he isn't badly hurt," Sue said as she turned back to re-enter the house. "It would be too awful if he should die before he has a chance to make good."

"Isn't there a doctor anywhere near here?" Bob asked as he followed her in.

"Not nearer than Cold Springs. His name is Lawton. Suppose you try to get him on the phone while I get the bed ready. He has a flivver and ought to get here in a couple of hours if he's at home.

Bob got the number after what seemed a long time and, to his great relief, the doctor was at home and promised to get there as fast as his car would bring him. Meantime Jack had built a fire and put on water to heat and, after that there was nothing to do except wait for them to bring the wounded man in.

It was not long, however, before they heard the sound of wheels and they had hardly more than gotten on to the porch when the buckboard turned in at the gate. Royce looked very white as they lifted him carefully from the seat where Jeb had been holding him.

"Is he dead?" Sue gasped as she caught sight of his white face.

"Only fainted," her father assured her.

Carefully they placed the wounded man on the bed and Sue hastened to fetch a basin of cold water, and, under her skilled ministrations, he soon opened his eyes with a deep sigh.

"Don't try to speak," Sue ordered, laying her cool hand on his brow.

The youth smiled weakly and closed his eyes.

"Get me the hot water," she whispered to Bob.

"Sue's about as good as a doctor," Jeb told him as he turned to obey. "But I ought to have told you to call Lawton."

"I did, sir, and he's coming as soon as possible," Bob replied.

"That's good. That man knows his business."

Bob was back with the water in less than a minute and, ordering them all out of the room, the girl set to work.

"He's asleep, now, and I think he'll pull through," she told the boys when she joined them on the porch a half-hour later. "I'm pretty sure the bullet just missed the lung and it went right through, making a clean wound."

"That's fine," Bob rejoiced. "You know, I believe that there's a lot of good in him only he's evidently weak."

"And he'll have you to thank if he makes good," Jack declared.

Before Bob had time to say anything Charlie came

to the door to tell them that breakfast was ready and they lost no time in obeying the summons.

"How came you fired those two shots for us to beat it back, dad?" Sue asked as soon as they were seated.

"I didn't."

"But we heard them."

"Must be some other gun sounds like Betsey, then."

"But it's funny you didn't hear them."

"Maybe I was too excited," Jeb grinned.

"Well, it's mighty lucky someone fired them."

"How come?"

Then she told him about the fire and what a time they had had to put it out.

"You're right it was lucky," Jeb assured them when she had finished. "It would have hit us mighty hard if that barn had gone up. It would have made us short on hay for next winter. The skunks. This country's got to get rid of them some way or other."

"How about the sheriff?" Bob asked. "Can't he do anything?"

"Frankly I don't know," Jeb told them. "He's a fellow by the name of Longly, Skeets Longly, they call him, and he does an awful lot of blowing about what he's going to do but, somehow or other, he doesn't seem to get many results. Oh, I know he's up against a hard proposition when he's bucking the Hains gang but, what I say is that if he can't do

the job, and it seems he can't, he ought to call on the state troops. I'll bet they'd clean it up but Skeets he can't seem to see it that way, leastwise he hasn't yet."

As soon as breakfast was over Sue hastened to see to her patient and returned almost at once with the news that he was still sleeping and seemed to be doing well.

"Where's the rest of the boys?" she asked as soon as she made her report.

"I told them to stay with the herd," Jeb told her. "Charlie's putting up some grub and one of the boys'll take it out to them."

"You think they'll come back?"

"Can't tell but I'm taking no chances."

About an hour later Dr. Lawton drove noisily into the yard, the radiator of his little car steaming like a locomotive. He was a little man, hardly over five feet tall, and probably did not weigh much over a hundred pounds. But what he lacked in size he more than made up for in energy.

"Where's the patient?" he demanded as he jumped out of the car.

"In here, doctor. Follow me," Sue ordered.

They were gone the better part of an hour while Jeb and the two boys anxiously awaited his report on the front porch. Finally they came out."

"Well?" Jeb asked.

"Waste of my time coming way out here," the little doctor growled. "That girls of yours is as good as any doctor."

"Huh, from the time you've taken I thought you must be taking him apart to see what makes the wheels go round."

"Had to do something to earn my fee, but he'll be as fit's a fiddle in a couple of weeks. But if that bullet had gone in half an inch lower down 'twould have been another story. By the way, who is he? Reminds me of a young fellow I've seen hanging around the hotel in town."

"Guess likely he's the fellow," Jeb said and told him Royce's story.

"Thought I wasn't mistaken," the doctor said when he had finished. "Well, he's fallen into good hands, all right, if he wants to turn over a new leaf and go straight."

"Oh, I'm sure he does," Sue assured him.

"Well, I hope so, but you never can tell about these fellows you pick up. Well, I must be getting back. Got a lot of work to do. Keep him quiet for a few days and you won't need me again."

"Red Hains got twenty-five or thirty of my cattle last night. That's how he got shot. Tried to capture the whole gang, he did. When you get back to town tell Skeets about it, will you? I don't suppose 'twill do any good, but you tell him just the same,"

Jeb said as the doctor, after filling the radiator, climbed into the car and started the engine.

"I'll tell him all right and give him a piece of my mind in the bargain," the doctor promised as he turned the car and shot out of the gate.

"He's not much to look at," Jeb smiled as he sat down, "but when it comes to action he's like a bundle of coiled springs. If we had him for sheriff it'd be a lot healthier around here. He's been urged to take the office but he says he has too many folks to put together now without trying to take more of them apart."

CHAPTER IX.

SUSPICIONS,

A WEEK passed and nothing more had been seen or heard of the Hains gang. The boys insisted on being a part of the day shift and from six in the morning until six at night they were out guarding the herd. It was a free open life and they enjoyed every minute of it. Young Royce improved steadily and by the end of the week was able to sit up a part of the time.

Several hours each day, while they were on duty, the boys, under the skillful tutelage of Slim and Slat, practiced throwing the lasso, a sport which they found very fascinating.

"Yer'll shore be experts if yer keep it up much longer," Slat told them after Bob had just executed a particularly difficult throw over the head of a young bull.

"When I can throw as well as you can I'll be satisfied," Bob told him.

"What, him?" Slim had come up in time to hear Bob's remark. "Shaw, he's no good."

"Who's no good?" Slats demanded very red in the face.

"You ain't, that is, not with a rope, you ain't."

"Huh, 'f I couldn't beat you two ways o' Sundays the only use I'd make of a rope'd be to hang myself." Slats retorted.

"Whar'd yer want us ter sent yer remains?" Slim asked gravely.

"Thar ain't goin' ter be any remains not till yer improve a whole lot," Slats flung at him as he turned away to attend to some duty. "Slim's all right," he continued, turning to the boys, "till he thinks somebody thinks as how he can do sumpin' better nor he can, then he jest has to naturally shoot off his mouth."

"But——"

"Course Slim's a good roper but, laws sakes 'wouldn't do ter let him know yer thinks so. Why only 'bout a month ago some idjut as ought ter have known better, complimented him on his throwin' an' right away he went an' bought a new hat two sizes larger nor he'd been wearin' an' his old one only six years old come next winter."

It was perhaps an hour later when Slim had a chance to tell his side.

"Yer'd think ter hear that tall shank o' bones talk that he'd invented the art o' ropin.' Why, bless yer heart, I've seen that guy miss more steers nor yer

could shake a stick at. Only time he's sure of catchin' anything's when he's right enough ter lay the loop over 'thout throwin' it 'tall."

Then, as he noticed the look of incredulity on the boys' faces, he hastened to add:

"Course I'm only speakin' in comparative terms, so to speak. What I mean is that compared with some he'd measure up fairly well, mebby better nor the average. But 'twouldn't do ter let him think yer think so. He's the greatest feller yer ever saw ter get a big head, Slats is. Why, 'twont more'n a month ago that he went an' bought a new hat two sizes bigger nor the one he'd been wearing jest because some feller told him a throw h'd made was the best he'd ever seen."

"And I don't suppose his old one was more than six years old," Bob said soberly.

" 'Twont that much, he'd only had it five years come Christmas."

"Can you beat it?" Bob asked a moment later after the cowboy had left them. "And yet, I reckon it would be hard to find two better friends anywhere."

"You said it," Jack agreed. "Why only the other day Slats gave Grumpy a licking because he said that Slim was too big for his pants."

"They're a funny pair all right, but mighty good fellows when it comes right down to brass tacks.

But who's that fellow?" Bob asked pointing toward a horseman who was riding toward them.

"He's not one of our boys, that's sure."

They were, at the time, on the side of the herd nearest the house, all the others being some distance away and the man was approaching from the direction of Cold Springs. As he came nearer they could see that he was middle aged, roughly, even raggedly dressed, and rode a horse which looked as disreputable as himself.

"Hello, boys," he sang out when he was within a few feet of them.

"How do you do?" Bob replied courteously.

"Only middling. What ranch is this here?"

"It's the Lazy S," Bob told him.

"Lazy S. eh. Looks like it had better be called the Busy S," he returned, glancing about. "How's chances on landing a job?"

"You'll have to see Mr. Stebbins," Bob told him.

"Whar is he?"

"He's probably at the house."

"And how far away is it?"

"About two miles," Bob told him.

"Think he wants any more help?"

"Really I couldn't say."

"I heard him say the other day that he'd like one or two more men," Jack volunteered.

"That's good news cause I sure do need one. Which way is the house?"

"That way," Bob replied pointing. "You'll see it as soon as you get over that rise."

"Then I go see him. Did you say he name is Steblits?"

"Stebbins," Jack corrected him.

"Stebbins. I'll try to remember it," the man said as he turned his horse and, with a parting wave of his hand, rode off.

"He looks as though he might have seen better days," Jack said when he was out of hearing.

"Doesn't look as though he could have seen much worse ones," Bob replied and then he remained in deep thought till Jack said:

"A penny for your thoughts."

"I was just thinking that I've seen that man before."

"You have? Where?"

"That's what I was trying to remember."

"Well, don't let me interrupt."

For several moments Bob did not speak. Something in the man's voice rather than his looks had awakened the memory of a few days past. Once again he was sitting on a log watching a group of men as they sat about a fire playing cards.

"I have it," he finally burst out. "That man belongs to Red Hains' gang."

"What?"

"You heard what I said."

"But are you sure?"

"Almost. You see, I didn't get a very good look at all of them but I remember that voice."

"But what's he doing here?"

"We could only guess at that but, taking it for granted that I'm right, what would you guess?"

"That he's a spy, of course."

"That may be. Yes, you're probably right but my guess is that he's spying after Royce."

"You mean—?"

"I mean that if he's the man I think he is, I believe Hains has sent him here to do some harm to Royce."

"What'll we do about it?"

"We ought to warn Jeb before he hires him, but I don't see how we can do it."

"Nor I. We couldn't possibly get to the house ahead of him without him seeing us."

"I have it," Bob said a moment later.

"What's your plan?"

"I'll go catch up with him and make some excuse for going to the house, and maybe I'll get a chance for a word with Jeb before he sees him. If he's all right he can't object and if he isn't we should worry."

"Good enough, but keep an eye on him. If he's

what you suspect he'll be suspicious. Don't let him get the drop on you," Jack cautioned as Bob mounted his horse.

"I'll be careful," he called back."

The stranger's horse was fully as slow as his appearance indicated and it was but a few minutes when Satan drew up alongside him. The man glanced at Bob interrogatively but did not appear either displeased or surprised.

"Just thought of something I had to go to the house for," Bob told him.

"That's fine. I like company. Yer see I'm a social critter, I am."

But he did not seem inclined to talk much as they jogged along, although he answered pleasantly enough whenever Bob spoke to him. To Bob's disappointment Jeb came onto the porch as they rode through the gate. He had hoped to be able to tell him what he knew about the man before they met but now that was impossible.

"That Stebbins?" the man asked.

"Yes, that's he."

Bob noticed that Jeb was looking at the stranger rather closely as he slipped from his horse and advanced to meet him.

"The boy said as how you needed another hand," he began resting one foot on the lower step.

"Well, I don't know. Guess maybe, I could use another man."

"Then I'm your best bet. I kin do most anythin' from roping ter cooking."

"What's your handle?"

"Most folks call me Los Varney."

"I thought so but wasn't quite sure," Jeb cried holding out his hand. "Don't you remember me?"

"Blast my eyes if it ain't old Jeb," the man almost shouted grasping the outstretched hand. "The boy said as how yer name was Stebbins but I didn't connect up with yer. Thought yer'd gone East and it must be all of fifteen year since we was up in the Bad Lands."

"It's nearer twenty," Jeb told him still shaking his hand.

"Mebby so, mebbly so. Time sure gets away fast when yer get along in years, don't it?"

"It sure does," Jeb agreed. "But how's the world been using you?"

"Oh, 'bout good's I deserve, I reckon. Yer know I never could keep a hold on any coin an' jest now well, I sure need a job."

"Well, you've got one," Jeb assured him. "Turn your nag into the corral and then come and get a bite, that is if you're hungry."

"Ever remember seein' me when I wasn't?" the man grinned.

Bob had stood by while the two men were talking, his astonishment growing with every sentence. Was it possible that he was mistaken? It would seem so but he knew that he had an almost uncanny memory of voices and he was not at all satisfied even though Jeb had recognized in the man an old friend. Should he tell Jeb what he suspected or would it be better to wait developments? Perhaps it would be the better plan to speak to Royce first and let him have a chance to recognize the man if he had been a member of the gang. Yes, that was the best plan, he decided and, throwing the reins over Satan's head, he entered the house.

He found Royce in the big living room sitting by the window. He looked as Bob entered the room.

"Hello, Bob. In early aren't you?" he greeted him.

"A little. I want to ask you something."

"All right, shoot."

"Was there a man by the name of Los Varney in Hains' gang?"

"Los Varney? Let me see. No, I think not, leastwise I don't remember the name."

"You're sure?"

"Yep. That's not a name to forget very easily, but, of course, I suppose most of them went by assumed names and he might have been calling himself something else. But what's the idea?"

Bob told him about the man who had applied for a job and his suspicions concerning him.

"But you say Jeb knows him?" he asked as soon as he had finished.

"Yes, he knows him all right. In fact it seems that they're old friends or, at least, used to be."

"Then I guess that settles it."

"Not necessarily. You see, it's been twenty years or so since they have seen each other and I reckon a man can go bad in less time than that."

"Well, that's right too," and Bob noticed that a pained look crossed the other's face.

"I didn't mean—" he began, but Royce interrupted.

"I know you didn't. What kind of a looking fellow is he?"

"About average height, around forty-five, smooth shaved, or rather he was perhaps four or five days ago. Has a rather high forehead and brown hair. That's about as well as I can describe him."

"But that description would fit half the members of the gang," Royce smiled.

"I know it but it's the best I can do. You see, he hasn't any outstanding characteristics which make him easy to describe. I reckon we'll have to wait till you see him."

The opportunity came about a half hour later when the man came into the room with Jeb.

"You've met Bob here," Jeb said. "And this is Royce. He's got nicked a few days ago in a rumpus we had with the Hains gang."

Bob watched the man closely as he stepped forward and held out his hand to Royce.

"Glad ter meet yer, son," he said.

"Thanks. I'm glad to know any friend of Mr. Stebbins," Royce said easily.

Bob could see that he was scanning the man's face closely but, to his surprise, there was no look of recognition in his eyes. Jeb and Varney soon went out and the two were alone again.

"Well?" Bob asked.

"Nothing doing. Never saw the man before."

"You're sure?"

"Reasonably. Of course, he may have worn a beard and has shaved it off. That probably would change his looks enough so that I wouldn't recognize him. You know, I was only with them a couple of days and, of course, didn't get to know any of them very well."

"Well, if he's what I thought, he's one peach of an actor," Bob declared.

It was not until after supper was over that Bob had a chance to tell Jack what had happened. He knew by the looks on his brother's face that he was crazy to learn how the man had succeeded in getting into the good graces of Jeb.

"What's the idea?" he asked as soon as he got Bob alone out by the corral. Bob told him what had happened and he gave a low whistle.

"So you missed it that time?"

"I'm not so certain of that," Bob replied.

"But if he's a friend of Jeb——"

"That's what Royce said, but, after all, that doesn't prove anything. I tell you, Jack, that man was playing cards by that fire the night they had me caught. I know it but, of course, it's another thing to prove it."

"Did you tell Jeb?"

"Not yet. Think I better?"

"Of course. What's the use in taking chances?"

"I suppose you're right, but I bet he'll laugh at the idea. Remember, all I've got to go on is his voice."

It happened that Jeb joined them at that moment and Bob told him all about it. Jeb's face was very thoughtful while he was telling the story and when he had finished, he said:

"I think you must be mistaken, Bob, but I'm glad you told me. There's no doubt that he's Los Varney all right, but it's not at all impossible that you may be right. It's a long time ago that I knew him and we were together for a year or more, but I've lost track of him since then and he may have gone wrong although, frankly, I don't think so.

However we'll keep an eye open and 'forewarned is forearmed' you know."

"He didn't laugh anyhow," Jack declared as soon as they were alone again.

Three days went by. Los Varney proved that he had made no idle boast when he had said that he could do most anything. The man was a splendid rider and roper, and a good mixer with the boys who seemed to like him from the very first. Bob could not see that he displayed any more interest in Royce than was perfectly natural for one of his make up. He seemed naturally sympathetic and appeared anxious to cheer the boy up whenever occasion offered. But that was all.

But there was one member of the household who did not like Los Varney.

"He's a snake in the grass," Sue told Bob before Los had been with them a day.

"What makes you say that?" Bob asked her.

"How do I know. I just know it, that's all," she retorted.

"Intuition?"

"Maybe."

And then Bob told her what he suspected and why.

"I knew it," she declared, her eyes flashing fire, as soon as he had finished.

"Then you think I'm right?"

"Of course, you're right. Didn't I tell you he's crooked?"

"But how can I prove it?"

"You can't. That is you can't till something happens but, you take my word for it, something'll happen before many days go by. Those fellows are short on patience and don't wait long. You'll see."

It was two nights later when something happened which proved to Bob, at least, that both Sue and he were right in their judgment of Los Varney. He woke up sometime during the night and, for some reason which he could not fathom, was unable to go to sleep again. He turned first on one side and then on the other, but it was no use. He was not conscious that he had heard anything or that anything had awakened him. Finally he determined to get a drink of water and slipped quietly from the bed careful not to disturb his brother.

In the kitchen he found the pail empty and, knowing that he would probably wake the whole family if he used the pump, he determined to go out to the pump near the barn. The night was very warm and he did not fear taking cold even though he was clad only in his pajamas. He had gotten his drink and was about to start back when something down by the corral caught his eye. It was bright moonlight and he could see for a long distance.

"Wonder what that is," he thought.

Then he quickly slipped behind a tree, for he had seen that it was a man. The distance was too great for him to be able to identify him but he did note that it was a man of average height. For some moments the man stood perfectly still and, happening to raise his eyes, Bob saw far out on the prairie the flash of light. Three times it flashed and then stopped. Then he glanced toward the man by the corral and his heart gave a great bound as he saw the signal returned.

"I knew it," he thought. "But I've got to be sure that it's he."

But that was easier thought than done. There was nothing between the tree and the corral behind which he could hide and the man would not come much nearer him than he now was if he waited until he returned to the house. While he was trying to devise some plan the signal from the prairie came again and this time it flashed for a longer time before waiting for the answer. At first Bob thought they might be using the Morse code. He could read it easily but when he tried to translate the flashes into words he was unable to get a single letter and was forced to conclude that they were using an arbitrary code.

He thought of making a wide detour behind the barn and up the other side of the corral but decided that it would take so much time that the chances were that the man would be gone before he could get

there. Then suddenly a plan struck him which he believed gave a fair promise of success, provided only that the man did not see him too soon.

Stretching both arms out in front he stepped boldly out from behind the tree and started to walk directly toward the man who was still flashing his light. If only he would keep it up until he got near enough to see him plainly, he thought, and walked as rapidly as he dared. Closer and closer he came and still the man did not once turn around. Not until he was within twenty feet of him did he become aware of his presence, then he turned and saw him.

"What are you—" the man began and then stopped for Bob was walking straight past seemingly not paying him the slightest attention. "He's sleep walkin'," he heard him mutter as he passed within three feet of him.

It was Los Varney, Bob got a good look at his face just as he turned and he also had no trouble in recognizing his voice. He walked straight past him and did not change his course until he was all of a hundred yards away. Then he turned in such a way as to bring him back in a wide circle to the front of the house. What Los was doing he did not know as he did not dare to turn his head in the slightest degree. The man might be following him and he feared that the least false move would give him

away. So he reached the house and got to his room without another sight of the man.

"Whew, but I believe it worked," he thought as he crept into bed.

That Los Varney was the man he thought had been proven to his own satisfaction but just what his object was was still an open question. Was it to wreak vengeance on Royce for deserting the gang or was it to gain some information which would enable Hains to run off more cattle? Ought he to go to Jeb at once and tell him what he had seen or would it be better to wait until morning. On the one hand there was the possibility that they were going to make another raid that very night but, on the other, should he try and inform the foreman right away, the chances were more than even that Los would be aware of it. On the whole he decided that the better plan was to wait until morning and take a chance that whatever the signals meant it was not scheduled for that night.

"I might spill all the beans," he thought, "if I do anything more tonight."

It was a long time before sleep came to him but finally he dropped off and the sun was shining in at the window when he awoke. He lost no time in hunting up Jeb and telling him what he had seen in the night.

"Well, well, is it possible that old Los has gone

wrong? It looks like it for a fact. But you certainly did pull off a slick stunt and I'll bet he's guessing now what it was all about."

"But don't you think it's serious?" Bob asked anxiously.

"Serious! You bet your life it's serious. If Los Varney belongs to that gang, and I reckon I've got to own up that the chances are that he does, after what you saw last night, there's no telling what may happen."

"What are you going to do about it?"

Jeb scratched his head. "What would you do?" he asked.

"I'd have him arrested."

"That might be a good plan but I was thinking that perahps it would be better to give him a little more rope and see if he won't hang himself. If he ain't suspicious any now he'll go right ahead and, now that we know that he's up to something, maybe we can catch him at it or find out what his gang's planning to do."

"I guess that would be better," Bob agreed thoughtfully.

"Then suppose you and Jack turn detective and keep an eye on him. But you'll have to be mighty careful and not give yourselves away. There's one thing in your favor," he added after a moment's pause. "Los isn't what you'd call quick witted, that

is, he didn't used to be, and I kind of wonder that Hains would pick him for a job of this kind."

"Perhaps he thought you wouldn't suspect him because you used to know him," Bob suggested.

"I reckon that's it and, frankly, I didn't, not till you told me what you saw last night."

Just then Charlie rang the bell for breakfast and, with a parting word to be careful, Jeb led the way into the house.

CHAPTER X.

ON WATCH.

Bob had not seen Jack before breakfast as he had gotten up some time before and had gone for a ride with Sue. But they returned before the meal was over and Bob came in for a good bit of joshing for being such a sleepy head.

"Your shift has been on duty two hours already," Sue told him.

"Then why isn't Jack on the job?" he retorted.

"Because I ordered him to ride with me," Sue told him.

"Then I reckon he's excused," Bob smiled.

Here Jeb broke in and told them what had happened during the night and what their plans were.

"I knew it," Sue declared as soon as he had finished. "I felt it in my bones that he was a bad one the minute I laid eyes on him."

"Your bones must be pretty sensitive," her father laughed.

"Well, you'll have to admit that they're usually right," she retorted.

"As if I'd dare to do anything else."

"You better hadn't."

Los Varney had been assigned to neither of the shifts but had been given work about the corral and, soon after breakfast was over, Bob wandered out that way. His idea was to talk with him and try and find out if he was in any way suspicious because of what had happened the night before. He found him mending the fence on the farther side.

"How come you ain't riding herd?" Los greeted him.

"Oh, Jeb seemed to think they didn't need us any more."

"I reckon he's right. Probably Hains has cleared out afore this. He don't often hang out long in one place. That's what makes him so hard ter catch."

"Did you ever see him?" Bob asked.

"Once, 'bout two year ago. He's a big brute of a man."

"So I've heard."

"He shore is an' I'd hate ter meet him on a dark night, that is if he had anything agin me. They say, thought, that he treats his friends right."

"But that's not much in his favor."

"I 'spose not, but I've known some what didn't."

For a moment there was a pause while Los was fitting a board, then he looked up and asked:

"Do yer ever walk in yer sleep?"

Bob was prepared for the question and showed just the right amount of surprise.

"Why, no, not that I know of. Why?"

"Oh, nothin'. I jest thought mebby yer did. I had a brother once and he uster walk in his sleep most every night."

"But what made you think I had the habit?" Bob asked innocently.

"I didn't think so, I only thought mebby you had," he replied a bit impatiently.

"Oh, I see."

After a little more talk about things in general Bob took his departure well satisfied that the man had no suspicion that he was playing a part the previous night.

"I guess Jeb was right about him being slow witted," he thought as he walked slowly back to the house.

He found Sue, together with Jack and Royce on the porch and lost no time in telling them of his talk with Los. He did not hesitate to speak in Royce's presence as the boy had proved himself in the fight and he had every confidence that he was sincere in his reformation.

"It's funny that I can't place the man," Royce said when he had finished, "because, of course, there can be little doubt but that he's a member of the gang."

Jeb had left for town shortly after breakfast and returned late in the afternoon. That he was in a perturbed state of mind was easily seen.

"I don't know what we're coming to," he said as he came up on the porch.

"Smatter, Pop?" Sue, who was lying in a hammock reading a story aloud to the boys, asked.

"Fellow by the name of Harris lost over two hundred head last night. He lives over the other side of the town and has one of the richest and best ranches in the State. I tell you things are hot in town, and the way folks are razzing Skeets is a caution. He'll simply have to do something mighty quick or resign his job. The ranchers won't stand for it much longer. Sometimes I wonder if he isn't in cahoots with Hains in some way."

"Do you mean it, Dad?"

"Oh, I don't know whether I do or not. I always thought he was honest till lately but I don't see how a man can be sheriff and get away with as little stuff as he does."

Bob and Jack had a long conference together earlier in the afternoon and half decided on a plan, but Jeb's account of the robbery the night before so far away from the ranch had put a different light on things.

"The most of the gang must have been over there

last night," Bob said as they met out in the big barn shortly before supper time.

"Then they probably left someone behind to signal Los," Jack suggested.

"Guess there's no doubt about that."

"Well, what'll we do now?"

"Watch him after it gets dark."

"Right."

"Do you think they're after the cattle or is it Royce they want?" Jack asked a few minutes later.

"Both, I imagine. Jeb was telling me the other day that the man Hains is a man who never forgets a real or a fancied wrong and that it's his boast that no man ever crossed him and didn't pay up for it."

"Lovely disposition, I'll say."

As soon as supper was over the boys went out by the shack and pitched horse shoes with those of the hands that were on the day shift. Los Varney was there, but took no part in the game declaring that he was too tired, and soon after eight he reckoned he'd turn in.

"Hitting the hay early, ain't yer, Los?" one of the men asked.

"Yep, yer see I been fixin' fence all day an' I ain't used ter the job. Good night."

"Night, Los," they all sang out as he entered the shack.

"He's certainly popular with the men," Bob told

Jack a little later as they were walking back toward the house.

"Seems so, and it may seem strange to you, but somehow I can't help having a kind of sneaking liking for him myself. I'm ashamed of it, but it's so."

"Same here," Bob acknowledged. "He's a likeable fellow all right but we mustn't let that influence us. The man's crooked and he's got to pay if we can make him."

"Of course," Jack agreed.

On the porch they found Jeb and Sue. Royce had retired feeling a bit tired, Sue told them.

"We're going to watch Los tonight," Bob announced.

"Nothing doing," Jeb said promptly.

"Oh, we'll be careful and it's the only way we can think of," Jack argued.

Jeb held out for some time but finally they obtained a hesitating consent on the condition that they would be careful and take no chances.

"Remember I'm responsible to Mr. Leeds for you and if anything happens I'll get the blame," he cautioned them.

"We'll see that it doesn't," Bob assured him.

It was nearly dark by this time and, as the sky was clouded over, it gave promise of a dark night. Cowboys, as a rule go to bed early and, shortly after nine o'clock the light in the shack went out. They

waited another hour and then decided it was time to go.

"You let me know if anything happens," was Jeb's parting order.

To the right of the shack and only a few feet away was a small shed with an open front where small tools were kept. From it the door of the shack was visible and the boys had decided to make it their headquarters for the night, there being little likelihood of there being seen by one coming from the shack.

"Now there's no need of both of us keeping awake," Bob said after they had arranged a couple of barrels in front of them leaving sufficient space between them for a lookout. "You lie down on those gunny sacks and I'll stand the first watch until twelve o'clock."

"You'll call me then?"

"Sure."

"That a promise, remember."

"Surest thing you know."

Jack threw himself down and in less than five minutes his regular breathing told his brother that he was in the land of Nod. It was very quiet and, save for the occasional whinnie of one of the horses in the corral, hardly a sound came to his ears. Slowly the minutes passed and it seemed to the waiting boy that two hours must surely have gone when his

watch told him that he had been there but a little more than an hour. He was having a hard time to keep awake long before twelve o'clock came. But he persisted and at last the hands of his watch pointed to the hour.

"All quiet along the Potomac?" Jack asked as he awoke at his brother's touch.

"All quiet," Bob told him.

"All right, now you get to sleep."

"We'll only stay till three o'clock," Bob proposed. "If he doesn't do anything by that time there's not much chance that he'll make a move before tomorrow night."

"Then I'll call you at three," Jack whispered.

"Make it half after two and we'll take the last half hour together."

"All right. Half after two it is."

It was not fifteen minutes later that Jack heard a slight creaking sound. Instantly he was on the alert his eye glued to the space between the two barrels. Someone was cautiously opening the door of the shack and, an instant later he saw a form step out. Although it was so dark that he could hardly see the man he had no doubt, but that it was Los. Who else would be creeping out at that time of the night? For what seemed to the boy a long time the man stood on the steps as though listening. Then, evidently satisfied that he had gotten out without

disturbing any of the men, he stole softly away through the darkness toward the corral.

Jack laid his hand on his brother's shoulder.

"He's come out," he whispered.

"Where is he?"

"Gone toward the corral."

"Then we must follow him, but don't make a sound."

At the door of the shed the two boys listened a moment but heard nothing.

"You wait here and let me see if I can get a line on him," Jack whispered.

"Better let me go."

"No, I spoke first. I'll get up close to the corral fence and if you hear me give the call of the whip-poor-will you come a-running."

"All right, but you be careful."

Jack stole away and in an instant the darkness had swallowed him up. Ten minutes passed and then the notes of the whip-poor-will floated to him from the direction of the corral.

"That's Jack," he whispered to himself as he set out.

He had covered only about half the distance to the corral when he saw a form coming toward him and, in a moment Jack joined him.

"He's taken one of the horses and gone off toward the hills," he told him.

"What'll we do? Go tell Jeb?"

"And let him get away?"

"Think we'd better follow him then?"

"Sure. Come on."

"But we told Jeb we'd be careful."

"Well, we will, but we've simply got to know what he's up to. Of course he's gone to meet someone."

"Unless he's gone for good."

"But I don't believe that."

"Well, neither do I."

They had been moving rapidly toward the corral while talking and by this time had reached the big gate. Opening it a trifle they stepped inside and Bob called softly to Satan. A soft whinnie answered him and a moment later a soft nose was rubbing his shoulder. It took Jack a bit longer to pick out his horse, but it was not much more than ten minutes after the man had started before they too were off.

"I'm not sure but we're doing a fool thing after all," Bob said as they started.

"How come?" Jack asked.

"Well, what chance have we of finding him in this darkness?"

"Perhaps not much but it's a chance."

They did not dare to gallop the horses for fear the man would hear them so they held them in to a fast trot which, on the soft ground, made hardly a sound. They had been riding in this way for the

better part of an hour when Jack, who was slightly in the lead, saw a spot of light flash up far ahead.

"Did you see that?" he asked turning around in the saddle.

"Yes," Bob replied.

"What's your guess?"

"Someone lighting his pipe."

"Mine too. I believe he's reached the rendezvous and is waiting. What do you say?"

"Wouldn't wonder."

"How far away should you say he is?"

"It's pretty hard to judge, but I'd set it at 300 yards."

"You hold the horses and I'll creep up and see if I can get a line on what's doing," Jack suggested.

Bob objected at first but finally, after Jack had positively refused to let him go, gave a reluctant consent cautioning him not to try to get too close.

There was neither tree nor shrub on the prairie to give him concealment but he knew that a man could see but a few feet in that darkness and he thought he could get near enough to overhear a conversation if there was one being carried on. He stopped every few feet to listen and it was not long before he heard a voice.

"Seems ter me he ought ter be gettin' here prutty soon."

It was Los's voice and it was evident that the man

was talking to himself. Jack could tell that he was not many feet distant although he could not see him and he decided to wait where he was and not risk trying to get closer. So he stretched himself at full length on the ground and waited. He could hear the other's horse as he moved about feeding on the short grass and, every now and then, the man muttered a few words of impatience.

Then, after he had been lying there for some thirty minutes the soft sound of hoofs striking the ground reached his eager ears.

"He's coming," he thought.

Nearer and nearer came the hoof beats and soon it was plain that the rider was urging his horse at a fast pace. The sound was coming from the direction of the hills and for a time Jack was afraid that he was in the line and was about to crawl to one side when the rider evidently changed his course a bit to the right and he kept his place. Almost at the same time a flash of light came from Los as a signal to the unknown rider. The man must have seen it at once for he again changed his course and once more the boy was in line. Quickly he crawled to one side and had covered but a few feet when the horse dashed past.

"Pretty close shave that," he thought as he again stretched out at full length.

"Your late, Gramp," he heard Los say a moment later.

"Couldn't help it," was the answer which Jack barely caught.

Then they lowered their voices to such an extent that he was unable to catch a word. So he crept softly, careful to make no sound, until he could see their forms. He was now not more than twenty feet away and he dared not go nearer. But, to his great disappointment, they were talking hardly above a whisper and he could only catch a word now and then, not enough to get the drift of the conversation. He heard Los mention the name of Royce but in what connection he could not tell.

It was maddening to be so near and yet he told himself, he might just as well be a thousand miles away for all he was learning. So intent was he in trying to hear them that he failed to note that a rift in the clouds was rapidly widening and, to his consternation, the full moon suddenly burst through, throwing a flood of light over the prairie. It seemed to the fear-stricken boy almost as light as day. He could see the two men so plainly that he could easily distinguish their features and he saw that Los was talking with a large black bearded man who was well past middle age.

What was he to do? He asked himself the question several times. Should he keep perfectly still where

he was and trust to luck that they would not see him or should he try to creep away? Neither plan seemed to promise much hope of escaping detection. Carefully turning his head he saw Bob and the two horses and was amazed that they loomed up so plainly. He fancied that Bob was beckoning to him but was not sure.

"Then yer understand?"

He heard the black bearded man ask the question in a much louder tone than he had been using.

"Sure," Los replied.

"Good. Then I'll beat it. Don't ferget day after ter-morrow."

"I won't."

Both men mounted their horses and Jack tried to flatten himself still farther into the grass. It was a tense moment and to say that he was frightened would hardly begin to express his feelings. He was scared stiff, as he afterward confided to Bob. It seemed impossible that both men would fail to see him and that they would shoot him on sight under the circumstances was, he believed equally certain.

He had decided that his best chance was to lie perfectly still and trust that either they would fail to see him or, in case they did, would take his form for a rock or log. It was a slim hope, but all he had. Did you ever try to lie perfectly still knowing that a single slight movement might be the last you would

ever make. If so then you have some idea of Jack's feelings.

All these thoughts passed through the boy's mind in the time that it took the two men to get into their saddles and he was afraid they would hear the beating of his heart so loudly did it seem to thump.

"Well, so long, Los," he heard the older man say.

"So long, Gramp," Los responded.

He knew that the stranger was turning his horse and, in a minute, would be facing directly, or nearly so, toward him. Could he hope to escape detection in that bright moonlight. A silent prayer for protection welled up in his heart as he heard the man speak to his horse. And the answer to the prayer came. Just as suddenly as the rift in the clouds had opened letting out the flood of moonlight, it now closed. It seemed as though a giant hand had drawn a giant curtain over the face of the moon and darkness, seemingly more intense than before, settled on the prairie. Jack's relief was so great that, for an instant, he was incapable of action then, as he heard the heavy breathing of a horse only a few feet away, he quickly sprang to his feet and darted off.

"What's that?" he heard a voice cry out.

"Nothin' but a buzzard," another voice replied.

Jack run for a hundred yards or more before he stopped to listen. He could hear the rapid beat of hoofs not far off, but he quickly perceived that they

were getting farther and farther away. So, with a prayer of thankfulness in his heart, he started on again.

"Bob!" He did not dare speak the word very loudly, but he was sure that if he had kept the right direction, his brother should be close at hand.

But there was no reply and he walked a bit further straining his eyes in an effort to pierce the darkness.

"Bob!" Again there was no answer and he began to fear that he had gotten off the course.

Then, a moment later, he saw a short distance ahead a tiny point of light and hastened toward it and in another moment the brothers were in each other's arms.

"Talk about close calls," Jack whispered.

"You said it," Bob agreed.

"I sure thought I was a gone gosling."

"And you would have been if luck hadn't been with you,"

"Or God," Jack added quickly.

"You are right. I believe it was God who pulled those clouds together over the moon at just the right time."

"He saved my life, I really believe," Jack said, and, moved by the same impulse, the two brothers sank on their knees in the grass and no more sincere thanks ever reached the ear of God.

"But what did you find out?" Bob asked as they got to their feet.

"That's the worst of it," Jack replied sadly. "I didn't learn a thing except that it's day after tomorrow."

What is?"

"That's what I don't know. You see I didn't dare get a foot nearer and they talked almost in whispers and I could only hear a word now and then. I heard the big man say day after tomorrow but I didn't get the connection at all."

"It's too bad, of course, but I'm mighty glad you didn't get any nearer. They'd have seen you sure as fate if you'd been a foot closer and it wasn't worth that, boy, not by a long shot."

"But we know that something's on the cards for the day after tomorrow. I suppose he really meant tomorrow as it was after twelve o'clock."

"Probably."

"But it's not dead sure."

"No, I suppose not."

"I wish we could be sure."

"If wishes were horses, you know," Bob quoted.

"Well, I guess we might as well be getting back now," Jack proposed after a moment's pause.

"But we've got to be mighty careful that Los doesn't run into us."

"That's so. If he found out that we're out to-night he'd know something was up."

"Sure he would. Now I reckon we'd better take it easy and let him get in first. He'll probably hit it for home about as fast as he can make it."

"But suppose he should notice that our horses are gone?"

"He'd probably smell a mouse, but he isn't apt to notice it. He'll just turn his horse in and hit the hay as soon as he can. Anyhow, that's a chance we've got to take. We probably couldn't beat him to it now even if we tried."

"You're right, of course, but I'll be nervous till I know he doesn't know that we know what we know."

"Two bad you couldn't get a few more knows in that last statement," Bob laughed.

They waited a few minutes longer and then mounted the horses and started at a slow trot for the ranch. The first hint of the coming dawn was showing in the eastern sky as they stole swiftly into the house after turning the horses into the corral.

"I'm not sure the game was worth the candle," Jack declared as he tumbled into bed.

"Time will tell," Bob replied sleepily from beneath the covers.

CHAPTER XI.

SKEETS STAGES A FARCE.

ALTHOUGH it had been after three o'clock when they got to bed the boys were up before seven. In the first place, they were anxious that Jeb should know the little they had learned and then they feared that, should they sleep later than usual, Los might know of it and be suspicious. Jeb was eating breakfast alone as they came from their room.

"Well?" he asked as they took their seats.

"Not particularly," Jack replied.

"Not particularly what?"

"Well."

"Oh, I see, and what's wrong?"

"That's what we don't know," Bob told him. Then he gave him an account of what had happened in the night.

"But you said you'd keep out of danger," Jeb said, turning to Jack after Bob had finished.

"But I didn't know that cloud was going to break open just at that time. You see, there would have been no danger if it hadn't."

"No, I don't see, but we'll let it go at that," Jeb

said dryly. "Did you say you heard him say to-morrow?"

"The day after to-morrow," Jack corrected him.

"To-day's Wednesday and, as he was speaking last night, I suppose he meant Thursday."

"That's the way we took it, but it was after twelve and I suppose he might have meant Friday," Bob suggested.

"Not a chance," Jeb assured them. "The next day doesn't come out here till it's daylight. He meant Thursday, all right, but just what he meant is an unknown quantity."

Just then the telephone rang and Jeb got up to answer it. The instrument was in the dining-room and they could readily hear what he was saying.

"I'll bet it's the sheriff," Bob whispered.

"Wouldn't wonder," Jack agreed.

"All right," Jeb was saying. "We'll be ready. How many? Why there'll be six or eight of us. I'll have to leave a few of the boys here to look after things, you know. About ten? All right, good-bye."

"That was Skeets," he told them as he resumed his seat. He's got a posse together and is going to make another of his spectacular hunts for Hains and his gang. Guess he got tired of being razzed. But it won't mean a thing. He won't find 'em."

"But you said you'd go," Jack said.

"Sure I said I'd go. I always do. It wouldn't do

not to back him up, you know. He'll come riding up here in about two hours at the head of about twenty men and boys all armed to the muzzle, so to speak, and he'll tell about how he's sure to find 'em this time and what he'll do with 'em once he gets his hands on 'em. I wish I knew Skeets was honest," he added after a short pause.

"Can we go?" Bob asked.

"Why, sure. There's no danger along with Skeets."

"How about me?" Sue had entered the room unobserved in time to catch the drift of the conversation.

"Nothing doing," her father said. "Not," he added, "that there's the least bit of danger, but how'd it look for a girl to be galavandering off with a gang of men and her the only female in the party. No, sir, your enough of a tom-boy as it is."

She did not press the point, contenting herself with saying that it wouldn't be much fun, anyway.

"You see, she's used to Skeets' raids," Jeb laughed.

"I'll say I am," she agreed.

"Suppose one of you boys run down to the shack and tell the boys to get what sleep they can before ten o'clock. They've been in most two hours and likely some of 'em are in bed now."

"How about Los?" Bob asked as he started up from his chair.

"That's so. What about Los?" Jeb repeated

thoughtfully. "What do you think. Better tell him about it?"

"I'd say yes," Bob declared, adding: "If we don't it seems to me he'll suspect that we suspect him."

"Guess you're right. Anyhow I don't see's he can do any harm if he goes along."

When Bob reached the shack he found all the boys off duty in bed except Slim and Grumpy.

"Now, what do yer know 'bout that?" Grumpy growled after Bob had delivered Jeb's message. "After workin' all night, too."

"But think o' the glory," Slim told him.

"Glory nuthin'. Whar's the glory in chasin' all over the country an' never findin' anything?"

"But the sheriff thinks this is going to be an exception," Bob told him.

"Aw, he's allays thinkin' that kind o' stuff," Grumpy snorted as he turned in.

Bob found Los out behind the corral still working on the fence, and he watched him closely as he told him about the coming hunt, but there was no trace of surprise or fear in the man's manner as he listened.

"Did Jeb say he wanted me ter go?" he asked.

"No, not particularly. He just said to tell you together with the rest of the men."

"Well, tell him I'll go 'long," he said after a moment's thought. "I planned ter get this fence done

ter day, but that's up ter him. Don't make no difference ter me."

By ten minutes before ten o'clock the boys, including Los, were gathered near the porch, their horses all ready.

"Bet yer two bits he's half an hour late," Grumpy growled to no one in particular.

"Take yer," Stubby shouted.

Stubby won the bet, for it was only fifteen minutes later when a cloud of dust was seen and in another ten minutes the small army swept in through the gate. There were, as Jeb had predicted, about twenty in all and the sheriff was riding at the head. He was a middle-sized man of about forty, his face tanned to the shade of a Mexican and he looked very pompous as he rode up to the porch leaving the rest of the men a few yards away.

"All ready?" he shouted in a deep bass voice.

"All set, Skeets," Jeb assured him waving his hand toward the horses. "What's the dope?"

"Dope's all right an' we're goin' ter get 'em this time. I've put up with all I agoin' ter an' I'm jest goin' ter clean that gang up good an' thorough an' show some of the folks 'round here who's who."

"That's the talk, Skeets. That's the kind of sheriff this county needs," Jeb told him.

By this time they were all in the saddle and lost no time in setting out for the hills. The boys

brought up the rear and Sue waved them a good-bye from the porch.

"I reckon Jeb had him sized up about right," Jack said in a low tone to Bob as they rode through the gate.

"You mean the sheriff?"

"Sure."

"He plays the part, all right."

As soon as they were away from the house they turned toward the north and the sheriff set a rapid pace. Sue had pointed out to them a narrow cleft in the hills in the direction they were heading and had explained that it was called "the Crotch," and for nearly two hours they kept on stopping only once to allow the horses a short breathing spell. They reached the entrance to The Crotch shortly after noon and there they halted while those who had brought a lunch ate it and also to allow the horses a short time to graze.

"What makes you think he's up this way, Skeets?" Jeb asked the sheriff as the latter came up where he and the two boys were sitting.

"Well, I'll tell yer. Yer see one of the Halliday boys was in ter town yesterday an' he said that as he was coming through The Crotch he heard a powerful lot of shoutin' an' it sounded 's though thar was a lot of cattle not far off. So I figger that Hains

must have his place whar he rebrands up this way somewhere."

He passed on and Jeb laughed. "That's always the way with him. Always has plenty of dope and sometimes a hunch. Funny he didn't say anything about a hunch. But that's all it amounts to. I'll bet a five dollar gold piece against a lead nickel that Hains ain't within twenty miles of here and, the worst of it is, I'm afraid that he knows it. I hate like blazes to think it of Skeets but I can't help it."

"Now, boys," the sheriff was standing on a large rock so that all could see him. "I've got a hunch that Hains' place is somewhere not far from here and that the trail ter it branches off from The Crotch. Now my idea is ter ride along slow like an' examine every bit of the way. He can't drive a big lot of cattle off the main trail an' not leave no marks, that's sartin, and we can't help findin' 'em if we look sharp enough."

"Got a magnifying glass, Skeets?" someone called out.

"What you want a magnifying glass fer?" the sheriff snapped.

"Thought mebby we'd be able ter see them signs better."

A shout of laughter went up and the sheriff grew very red in the face as he got down from the stone

and mounted his horse without another word, and soon they were in motion again.

The Crotch was a deep defile between the high hills which in places rose almost perpendicularly. The path itself was several feet wide in places, but now and then narrowed down so that but one rider could pass at a time. Under foot it was uneven and rocky, making fast riding impossible.

"Who'd be fool enough ter try ter drive a bunch of cattle in here?" one man growled.

"It's probably because he's gone where no one would expect him ter go that nobody's been able ter find him," another retorted.

For over an hour they plodded through the passageway, every man keeping a close watch for any sign, however small, which might indicate a lead-off into the hills. But no such passage was found and about two o'clock they suddenly emerged onto a broad plateau which sloped gently down to the Rio Grande some two miles off.

"Guess your hunch had a kink in it, Skeets," someone called out.

The sheriff appeared quite crestfallen, although it seemed to Bob that he rather overdid it.

"Looks kinder like it fer a fact," he acknowledged. "And I was sartin we'd find him this time. But, remember, boys, you all get paid fer a day's work jest the same."

After a short rest for the horses they started home and reached the ranch soon after four o'clock.

"Didn't I tell you it was all a fake?" Jeb asked as soon as the rest of the party had gone on. "He had no more idea of finding Hains than a squirrel has of storing up cheese for winter."

"It looked that way to me," Bob said.

"Why a blind man could see it," Jeb insisted.

"Pretty near," Jack agreed.

"Did you notice Los any to-day?" Jeb asked after a short pause.

"Yes," Bob replied, "and it seemed to me that he was particularly light-hearted."

"Of course he was. He knew we were on a wild goose chase, and that their plans for to-morrow weren't going to be interfered with, at least so far as Skeets was concerned. But I'm some worried about them same plans. I have a hunch they're planning something big and that I'm to be the goat."

"It seems to me," Bob began, "that you've got enough evidence against him to warrant accusing him of being in cahoots with the rustlers."

For several moments Jeb was silent and the boys could see that a struggle was going on in his mind.

"I suppose you're right," he finally said. "But I sure do hate to do it."

Just then the object of their conversation came up to the porch where they were sitting and Jeb de-

cided to take the bull by the horns and have it over with.

"Los," he began before the man had time to speak, "I want to ask you a question and I want a straight answer. Who were you signaling to night before last?"

Bob was watching the man closely and he saw him give a sudden though slight start.

"What yer mean, signaling?" he demanded.

"You know what I mean. Come, out with it."

"I didn't signal no one."

"What's the use of lying, Los? You know me well enough to know that I wouldn't accuse you if I didn't have you dead to rights."

Los turned a look of malignancy toward Bob as much as to say he knew where Jeb had gotten his information.

"I reckon it ain't any use fer me ter say any more," he said sullenly.

"Then you refuse to tell?"

"You heard me."

"Then I don't suppose you'll tell me who it was you met out on the prairie last night."

"Who—" Los began but Jeb stopped him.

"It's no use for you to deny it, man. I know that you're a member of Red Hains' gang and that you've got a plan on for tomorrow."

"Then you know more'n I do," he growled.

As he spoke Bob saw his hand creep back toward his hip pocket and was about to utter a warning when Jeb said:

"Keep your hands away from your pocket and put 'em up."

Bob had one eye on him as he spoke and he afterward declared that he did not see his hand move but before he had finished speaking Los was looking old Betsey in the face.

"I hate to have to do this, Los, but I reckon you've forfeited all claim to my friendship and if you make a single move I'll put a hunk of lead where it'll do the most good."

"But I tell yer yer've got this all wrong, Jeb," Los insisted.

"Sorry, but I don't think so. In the drawer in my desk, Bob, you'll find a pair of handcuffs. Get 'em will you?"

Bob hastened to obey and, at Jeb's order, snapped them over the wrists of the angry man.

"This here's the worst job yer ever did fer yerself, Jeb."

"May be it is but, in this world we have to do what seems best at the time and, much as it goes against the grain, it sure seems the proper caper just now. Jack, run down to the shack and tell a couple of the boys I want 'em, will you? Get Slat and Slim if you can."

"Boys," Jeb said a few minutes as Slim, Slat and Jack came up, "I have reason to feel sure that this man's a spy and a member of Hains' gang of rustlers."

"You sure, Boss?" Slim looked his incredulity.

"I'm dead certain." And he told them the evidence against him.

"It's all wrong," Los insisted but they paid no attention to him.

"Now what yer know 'bout that?" Slim turned to Slat who merely shrugged his shoulders. "Guess then the only thing ter do is to swing him," he suggested.

"No, boys, we won't hang him though I've no doubt he richly deserves it. Take him out to the barn and lock him up in one of the box stalls. They're good and strong and, with these bracelets on, I reckon he'll stay put."

"Seems ter me that's goin' ter a lot of trouble when he'll swing later on anyhow. Of course, what yer say goes, Boss. Come on thar yer mangy coyote."

"Yer'll be sorry fer this the longest day yer live, Jeb," Los threatened as the men led him away.

"I'm sure sorry that a thing of this sort should have happened," Jeb told the boys after Los was out of hearing. "But I do wish I had a line on what was on the cards for tomorrow."

"You don't suppose it's to be an attack on the ranch, do you?" Bob asked, but Jeb shook his head.

The night passed quietly. Bob and Jack were both wakeful and several times between cat naps they stole softly out of the house and watched the distant hills. Jeb too was uneasy and nearly every time they awoke they could hear him moving about in his room. But at last morning came and it was a rather mournful crowd that gathered about the breakfast table.

"Goodness gracious!" Sue broke out when they were about half through eating. "A body'd think this was a funeral. What's the matter with everyone?"

"Guess we're all kind of scared and don't want to say so," Jeb smiled.

"Well, I'm not scared. What is there to be afraid of I'd like to know? Here we've got fourteen able bodied men and they haven't got more'n about half that number at the most. You say the word and I'll go out alone and bring 'em in."

"You got gumption enough to do it all right," Jeb grinned but I reckon you'd find that you had bit off more'n you could chew."

"Well, maybe so but I'm off for a ride. Come on, boys, bet I'll get my saddle on first."

It was a glorious morning as they set out a few minutes later at a slow canter across the prairie in the direction of the hills.

"Don't get too far away," Jeb shouted as they left.

"I'll race you to the top of the knoll," Sue challenged as soon as they were fairly away from the house.

It was merely an excuse for a burst of speed as Satan could easily out run the other horses and they were some distance in the rear when Bob drew rein on the top of the rise.

"He sure can run some," Sue declared as she rode up a moment later about fifty feet ahead of Jack.

"You said it," Bob agreed proudly.

For a few minutes they waited to give their mounts a breathing spell then Bob asked:

"Shall we keep on or circle around?"

"Oh, let's keep on," Sue said, "So long as we don't go into the hills we'll be safe enough."

So they rode on and on until the foothills were only a few hundred yards away. Then Bob drew up.

"I reckon this is as far as we'd better go," he said.

"I suppose so," Sue agreed. "We'll let the horses breath a spell and then hit the back trail."

They dismounted and, throwing the reins over the horse's heads allowed them to browse on the thick grass while they strolled about to stretch their limbs.

"Well, I guess it'll be about time for chow by the time we get back," Sue said a half hour later.

She had scarcely spoken the words when Bob uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"Look," he gasped.

Out from the foothills came a half dozen men riding at full gallop directly toward them.

"It's the Hains gang," Jack gasped.

"Let's beat it," Sue cried springing for her horse.

"No use," Bob told her. "They'll be here before we can get started.

She saw that what he said was true for, even then, the men were close at hand, and a moment later they were surrounded.

"What yer doin' out here?" the leader, whom they at once recognized as Hains, demanded.

"Just taking a little ride," Bob told him.

"Be, eh. Well, suppose you take another back the way yer came."

"We were just going to," Bob said as he vaulted into his saddle.

"Wait a minute," Hains demanded. "You got a feller by the name o' Royce at the ranch, ain't yer?"

"What if we have?" Bob asked easily.

"A lot of it. I want him, that's what."

"Then you'd better come and get him."

"I don't have ter. Yer agoin' ter send him ter me."

"What makes you think so?"

"I don't have ter think so, I know it."

"Indeed."

Bob could keep his temper down as well as most

boys but he was a bit nettled by the man's assurance and could not help showing it.

"Indeed I'll show yer," Hains snapped. "You two youngsters get out o' here while the gettin's good. The girl stays with us."

"What?"

"Yer heard me. Git."

"But—"

"Thar's no buts about it. When I say git I mean git."

Bob could see that the man meant business and his heart sunk within him. He was no coward but what could he and Jack do against six armed men? And yet, to desert the girl, even under the circumstances, seemed to him impossible.

"What are you going to do with her?" he asked.

"Keep her till Royce comes back ter me."

"Why not keep me instead?" Bob asked eagerly.

"Nuthin' doin'. We're goin' ter keep the girl an' yer can tell her father that when he gives that guy Royce up ter us he kin have his gal back and not afore."

"I won't go," Bob asserted stoutly.

"You might as well, Bob," Sue broke in. "They've got me and you can't help it."

"But, Sue, I can't leave you like this," he protested.

"I reckon as how yer kin an' what's more yer a goin' ter an' pronto too. Git hold of her reins, Jim,

an' be off with yer. I'll tend ter these kids," Hains ordered.

The man called Jim rode up beside Sue and, taking hold of her reins, spoke to his horse and at once started back toward the hills followed by the rest with the exception of the leader.

"Haven't you any manhood?" Bob asked scornfully.

"I've got six hunks o' lead in this gun if yer don't do what I say," Hains growled. "An' I'll give yer just one minute ter start goin'."

The man had the gun in his hand and, seeing that resistance would be folly, Bob turned to Jack.

"Come on, Jack."

But before giving the word to Satan he looked the man full in the eyes and said:

"You dare to harm one hair of her head and I'll get you if it's the last thing I ever do."

"Git."

"This is awful, Jack," Bob groaned as soon as they were out of hearing.

"I'll say it's awful and then some," Jack repeated. "But I can't see that it was our fault."

"No time to argue about that now. We must get to the ranch as soon as possible and give the alarm."

They were riding side by side while talking but now Bob spoke to Satan and the horse seemed to spurn the ground beneath his feet as he drew away

from Jack. Bob never could seem to remember much about that wild ride home. His brain seemed dulled by the calamity and all he was able to think was, "How can I tell her father?"

Jeb was on the porch reading a paper as Bob, his horse covered with lather, dashed in at the gate.

"Sue," he gasped as he threw himself from the saddle.

Jeb sprang to his feet. "What about her?" he shouted.

"They—they've got her."

"Who has?"

"Hains and his gang."

"Give it to me quick," Jeb demanded, and, with hanging head, Bob told him what had happened.

The man did not say a word until he had finished.

"It's bad, mighty bad," he declared as Bob came to the end of his tale.

"I—I," Bob began.

"No, you're not to blame. You did all you could. I know you'd have saved her had it been possible. Did he say how long he'd wait?"

"No, he set no time limit. He only said that when Royce came back to him he'd let Sue go."

"But he'll kill the boy," Jeb groaned.

"Do—do you think so?" Bob stammered.

"I'm afraid so."

"Well, he'll have the chance."

Royce was standing in the doorway as they looked up.

"You mean—?"

"That I'm going to Hains at once, of course."

There was no trace of bravado in his voice as he made the statement, only a fixed determination.

"But—" Jeb began.

"There's no room for buts," Royce declared. "You don't suppose I'd be enough of a skunk to allow your daughter to suffer after what you've done for me. Thank God I've got some manhood left."

Jeb could say nothing more but dropped his head into his hand as Royce turned back into the house to come out again almost immediately hatted and booted.

"I reckon I'll have to take one of the horses," he said as he paused a moment beside the two. Then, as Jeb nodded his head, he went on: "I want to thank you both for what you did for me and if I never see you again, I'll never forget you, never."

He was gone, running toward the corral, before either Jeb or Bob could find words to answer him and, a moment later, they saw him ride out mounted on a roan, the poorest horse on the ranch.

"There goes a brave man to his death," Jeb groaned.

"While there's life there's hope," Bob quoted.

Just outside the gate Royce met Jack.

"Where you goin?" Jack shouted.

"Just for a ride," the other called back. "Goodbye if I don't see you again," and with a wave of his hand he was gone.

"Was he going to give himself up to Hains?" Jack asked a moment later as he joined Bob and Jeb on the porch.

"Yes," Jeb replied sadly.

"But what—?"

"I know, but what could I do?" Jeb groaned.

"You did just right and so did he," Bob declared.

"But we must do something and do it quick."

"What can we do?" Jeb asked looking up.

"Get the boys and follow him just as soon as he gets far enough away so he won't see us."

"But he'll get out of sight in the hills long before we can get there," Jack objected.

"Of course we'll have to take the chance of finding him. Remember he doesn't know where Hains' hiding place is."

"Then how does he expect to find him?"

"I don't know. Do you suppose he thought of that?" Bob asked turning to Jeb.

"I doubt if he did. But it's more'n likely that Hains will have a man on the watch for him. In fact I imagine he knows that he's coming before this."

"Then he'd see us if we start before dark," Jack suggested.

"Another chance we'll have to take, but, man, we've got to do something."

"Surest thing you know. I wasn't hinting at not going," Jack assured him.

"I know that," Bob said quickly. "But how soon do you think we'd better start?" he asked turning to Jeb.

"I'd say pretty soon," Jeb replied rising from his chair. "You boys go and tell the others about it and send one of them after the boys who are on shift and tell them to leave two on guard and the rest follow us. I'll get my boots on and be ready by the time you get them rounded up."

The night shift had been inside the shack eating dinner and so had seen nothing of Royce as he left nor had they seen the boys return. Great was the excitement when Bob burst in and told them what had happened.

"The miserable skunks! Just wait till I get my hands on 'em," Grumpy shouted as he jumped up and strapped his gun belt about his waist.

"Thar won't be enough left of that Hains guy ter sling a cat at when I get through with him," Slats declared as he followed suit.

Many other remarks of like character were uttered as they were getting ready but the boys were already on their way back to the house. They found Jeb

waiting for them and in a few minutes the boys came with horses.

"Spike's gone fer the others," Slats called out as he rode up.

"Then I reckon we'd better be on our way," Jeb said. "But," he added, "we'll take it easy first along."

"Fer why?" Slats asked indignantly.

"I suspect Hains or one of his men is watching from the hills to see if Royce is coming and we want to give him time to quit before we get over the rise," Jeb explained.

"But s'pose he don't quit?" Slats asked.

"Then he'll see us and, of course that'll make it harder but I don't see as we can help it. If we wait too long we'll likely lose him."

"We'll find him all right," Stubby shouted encouragingly.

"I hope so," Jeb returned soberly.

They started off at an easy lope and hardly a word was spoken until they reached the top of the rise.

"There he is," Bob said pointing toward the distant hills.

They could see Royce about half way between where they were and the hills and they knew that he was making the best time possible with the horse he had.

CHAPTER XII.

THE "TAIL" OF THE MOUNTAIN LION.

"If he turns and sees us no knowing what he'll do," Jeb said as they paused a moment at the top of the rise.

"But I don't believe he'll turn," Bob declared. "He's only thinking of getting there and rescuing Sue."

"Then you think we better make a rush for it?"

"I would."

"Then come on, boys, full speed ahead."

And now they let their horses out to the limit and swept across the prairie like an avenging whirlwind. They were about two-thirds of the way from the rise to the hills when Royce reached the timber. They saw him draw rein and, for a moment hesitate as though uncertain just where to go, then he started again and the next minute was lost to view. Twenty minutes later, they were at the point where he disappeared. Far back they could see four horsemen just coming over the rise.

"There comes Spike and the boys," Slats cried.

"But we can't wait for them," Jeb told him.

"Course not, but what's the plan?" Slats asked.

"It's too dry to trail him, I'm afraid so I think we'd better split up and go in by twos. We'll keep within a short distance of each other however, and two shots close together will be the signal to come a-running."

"Righto, let's beat it," Slats agreed.

They had hardly started again when they met the horse Royce had ridden coming out and they decided that it would be better to leave the horses as they believed they could make better time on foot and there would be less danger of discovery. So they tied them to convenient trees and started off on foot after Jeb had explained that the first to catch sight of Royce was to notify the others by giving the hoot of the owl, the signal of the shots to be used only in case of an emergency.

Royce had entered the forest at a point about half way between the trail which led to the Owl's Head and that which they had taken the day before in company with the sheriff. It was the most rugged appearing portion of the range and, as Bob and Jack pushed their way in, it seemed to be getting ever rougher. There was nothing which even remotely resembled a trail and huge boulders interspersed with dense underbrush made their progress decidedly difficult.

"I say, Bob, this seems kind of foolish to me," Jack

panted after they had been separated from the others for some ten minutes.

"How come?" Bob asked.

"Well the whole thing seems fishy to me."

"What do you mean fishy?"

"Well, how did Royce know which way to go?"

"He didn't unless someone of the gang met him,"

Bob told him.

"You think someone did meet him?"

"I think it's more than likely."

"What makes you think so?"

"Common sense."

"How come?"

"Use your bean, boy, use your bean. Hains would know that he wouldn't know how to find him, wouldn't he?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, I imagine he didn't have much doubt but what he would come, no one would. So isn't it probable that he'd either meet him himself or have someone else do it?"

"Sure Mike. You reason like a lawyer. But, even so, what chance have we to find him or them?"

"Very slight, I'll admit, but, you know, one chance in a million is better than none at all."

"I know that and I reckon you've got the ratio about right, one chance in a million."

They had been pushing forward all the time they

were talking, all the while looking eagerly for a sign which would tell them that Royce had come that way. At first the way had been a gradual rise but soon it began to be steeper and by the time they had come to the above point in their conversation it was so nearly perpendicular that they were often obliged to pull themselves up with the aid of the bushes which grew here and there. An hour slipped by from the time they started into the hills and both boys were panting with the exertion.

Suddenly Bob, who was a few feet ahead, stopped and Jack saw that he was closely examining the ground beside a huge rock.

"What you found?" he panted as he reached his side.

"Look and see what you make of it."

Beside the rock was a bed of thick moss and he could see that it was damp although the reason was not apparent as everything was dry all about. At first he saw nothing which explained his brother's action but a more thorough scrutiny disclosed two slight depressions. He got down on his knees the more closely to examine them.

"They are foot prints," he announced a moment later.

"You sure?"

"No doubt of it."

"How old?"

"Not more than a half hour."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because it wouldn't take moss like this much longer than that to obliterate marks like that. You ought to know that."

"I do, but I wanted to see if your opinion was the same as mine."

"And is it?"

"Exactly."

"Then we're on the right trail unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless someone of our crowd has come this way ahead of us."

"But they wouldn't be that far ahead."

"Not likely."

"Then I believe we've struck his trail and now to see if we can find another mark to show which way he went from here."

For fully ten minutes they searched before Jack called softly:

"Here it is, Bob."

He was off a short distance above and slightly to the right of the bed of moss and pointed to a freshly snapped twig as his brother joined him.

"You're right," Bob declared after a quick examination. "Now we've got the general direction, but keep your eyes peeled."

They had climbed nearly a quarter of a mile, they

judged, before finding another sign and this time it was only a small rock which had evidently slipped and turned over as someone stepped on it. But a slight dampness on the top proved to their trained senses that it had been but recently disturbed.

"We're going right," Bob declared much encouraged.

"You said it," Jack agreed. "That rock must have been turned not much more than fifteen minutes ago."

"Not more than that surely."

"Then we're gaining on him," Jack declared.

"Or them," Bob corrected him. "Don't forget that there's probably two of them if not more."

"Him or them, it's all the same just so we find Sue," Jack declared as they started off again.

If their way had been hard it was all but impassable now. The dead underbrush was so thick that often they had to make a wide detour, but so dry was it that, looking back, they could see that they had left no trail behind them.

"Wonder how far it is to the top here," Jack panted a little later as he pulled himself up a particularly steep place by the branch of a convenient tree.

"Goodness knows," Bob replied a few feet behind him.

"Well, it seems as though we must be most to the

top o' the world. If we get much higher we'll have to duck to let the clouds go past."

It had been nearly two hours since they started up the hill and during that time they had neither seen or heard a thing of their friends. From time to time they had seen signs which led them to believe they were still on the right trail and to encourage them to keep on.

"Wonder where the boys are," Bob said as they paused a moment to get their breath.

"Goodness knows. They can't be very near us or we'd heard them. I imagine they kept going straight up while we've been bearing to the right ever since we got on to the trail.

"Then likely they're miles off to our left."

"More than likely."

"But we can't very well get lost. All we've got to do is to go down hill and we're bound to come out somewhere."

"But we're going to keep on till we strike something."

"You bet."

But when another hour had passed and they were still mounting they were about tired out and Jack declared that he'd have to rest. So they threw themselves on the ground where was a thick bed of moss and relaxed their tired limbs.

"One thing's dead sure," Jack declared after they had somewhat recovered their breath.

"What's that?" Bob asked.

"Either we're not gaining on them any more or we're on a cold trail."

"I don't believe your last guess is right. We've seen too many indications for it to be guess work."

"Then all I've got to say is that they're hiking it some."

They rested for half an hour regretting the loss of time but realizing that it was necessary, and then took up the trail again. They had gone but a short distance when, suddenly a piercing shriek ran out through the forest seemingly but a short distance behind them.

"What was that?" Jack gasped stopping in his tracks.

"I'm not sure but I think it must be a mountain lion. I've read that they yell something like that," Bob told him.

"It sounded to me like a woman yelling."

"I know. That's what makes me think it was a lion."

"Well, here's hoping he isn't on our trail."

Then another screech, nearer than the first, almost made the blood curdle in their veins.

"I'm afraid it is though," Bob said slowly.

"What'll we do? They're dangerous, aren't they?"

"I reckon so."

"How about a tree?"

"No good. They live in trees."

Another time the shriek sounded and now they were certain that the lion, if it was a lion, was following them and could not be more than a few yards off.

"It's a case of the hunters being hunted," Jack declared.

"And we'll have to stand our ground and trust to our revolvers. Maybe he won't attack us," Bob advised.

The big cat did not yell again and they were beginning to hope that it had passed them by after all, when Bob saw a thick clump of bushes, about thirty feet from where they stood, move and a pair of yellow eyes peered out at them. He nudged Jack and pointed.

"Shall we shoot?" Jack whispered.

"Not yet. Let's see what it's going to do."

The eyes remained motionless for a couple of minutes then disappeared.

"Guess he thought he better hadn't," Jack whispered.

"Listen," Bob ordered.

They could just catch the soft rustle of a bush now and then.

"He's creeping around to our right," Bob whispered.

"We ought to have shot when we had the chance."

"Maybe, but I reckon we'll have another."

"But that was a peach of a shot," Jack insisted.

"There he is again."

This time the eyes looked out from a clump not over twelve feet away and Bob whispered:

"Now let him have it."

But he spoke too late. An angry snarl came from the beast and the huge cat seemed to literally rise in the air and sail toward them.

Bob's gun spoke while the cat was still in the air but he knew that he had missed.

"Duck," he shouted as he sprang to one side.

Jack endeavored to obey but, in stepping back, his heel caught on a root and he bent down on his back and the lion landed fairly on top of him. Bob's heart seemed to leap into his throat as he saw his brother go down, and, without an instant hesitation he sprang forward. Boy and beast were rolling over and over on the ground first one on top and then the other. He saw at first glance, that Jack had a hold on the cat's neck with both hands and was keeping its jaws away from his throat by main strength. So fast were they moving that he did not dare to fire for fear of hitting Jack, but he knew that he must do some-

thing at once or the boy would be clawed to death even though he succeeded in escaping the jaws.

With Bob to think was to act and it was probably not more than ten seconds from the time the cat jumped before he had a hold of his tail and was pulling for all he was worth. At the first tug the big cat uttered an angry snarl and Bob shouted:

“Push him off.”

But either Jack did not hear or he was afraid to let go his hold for the pull did not budge the animal in the least. But it did stop the rolling and the beast, as though wondering what had attacked him from the rear, wrenched its head away and turned its eyes on Bob who still was pulling on the tail. With another angry snarl it tore itself from Jack's body and turned to attack its new enemy. But Bob had a grip of death on that tail and as the cat turned he too spun around so that the cat's head was away from him. But he knew that it was only a question of seconds when the mighty cat would wrench the tail from his grasp in one of his lunges. If only he had his gun in one hand but he had slipped it into his pocket when he had grabbed hold of the tail and he did not dare reach for it. His fingers seemed to be getting numb so tightly did he have to cling and he felt that they were slipping in spite of his strongest efforts.

Then, just as he knew that the cat was winning

a shot rang out and the struggle was over. Shot through the head the cat fell over on one side, clawed frantically for a moment and then was still.

"Some shot," Bob gasped.

"And some pussy cat," Jack added as he gazed at the huge animal.

"Are you hurt?"

"Guess I got a few scratches but they don't amount to much," Jack replied.

Suddenly, to Bob's amazement, Jack burst out laughing.

"What's funny," he demanded.

"Honestly, Bob, if you could have seen yourself dancing about holding on to that fellow's tail, you wouldn't have to ask. It was better than a circus though I didn't think of it at the time."

"But your pants are torn to ribbons, boy. Are you sure you're not injured?"

Investigations showed that Jack's legs were scratched in several places but the scratches were not deep and, although a couple of them were bleeding rather freely, he insisted that it was nothing.

"It's a lucky thing you had on heavy breeches or you'd have been torn up for fair."

"I've heard of mountain lions but I never knew they came that large," Jack declared. "I'll bet he's all of seven feet from his nose to the tip of his tail. I'd sure like to have him stuffed."

"I thought a few minutes ago that he was going to have you stuffed inside of him," Bob said with a shudder. "That sure was one close call. Deliver me from any more of them."

"The call or the lion?"

"Either or both," Bob assured him.

"Well, come on, we can't wait here all day," Jack said.

"Think you're able to go on?"

"I know it. Anyhow we can't give up now."

A few minutes later they reached the top of the ridge and there they almost at once discovered signs that told them that, instead of going down the other side, Royce had turned to the right.

"Where do you suppose he's heading for?" Jack asked.

"Search me. All I know is he's on his way."

For some time their way led along the top of the ridge and Bob had just glanced at his watch and was about to tell Jack, who was a few feet ahead, that it was four o'clock, when he turned and held up his hand as a signal for silence.

"What is it?" he asked as soon as he had come up to him.

"I think he's just ahead of us. I saw a man a minute ago just beyond that big tree."

"Only one?"

"That's all I saw. Of course, there might have been someone ahead of him."

"Think he saw you?"

"I'm sure he didn't."

"That's good. Now to keep him in sight without letting him know it."

They advanced now with extreme caution, stopping every few minutes to listen and nearly every time they could hear the cracking of brush or the rattle of stones as their quarry pushed on in advance of them. Now and then they caught sight of him and once Jack was sure he saw two men.

"Seems to me we must be getting pretty near over to The Crotch," Bob said in a low voice about half an hour after they first saw Royce.

"Can't be very far from here. But listen. They've turned off to the left."

A moment later they struck a narrow but well defined path, which was remarkably smooth considering the locality.

"I say, Bob, we never thought to give the signal when we struck them," Jack said as they started along the path.

"Well, what do you know about that. Guess you'd better give it now, but I have no idea any of them are near enough to hear you."

Jack was an excellent imitator and the hoot hoot which he gave utterance to was realistic enough to

deceive anyone. They listened but no answer came.

"Well, I didn't expect any," Bob said as they started on again. "I doubt if they're within five miles of here."

"Where do you suppose this path comes from?" Jack asked.

"I wonder, but just now I'm more concerned about where it goes to," Bob replied.

"It looks as though it was used a lot anyhow."

"It sure does but it's certain that no cattle have been driven over it."

Although the trail was smooth it was very crooked winding in and out among the trees and large rocks and they had to proceed with great care for fear of running into the men they were following for, of course, they had no way of knowing when they might stop for a rest.

Once they made a sharp turn in the trail and drew back just in time to avoid discovery by Royce and another man who were sitting on a log, apparently resting. They were talking in low tones as though they feared someone might be following them, and the boys, crouching in the bushes, were unable to hear what they were saying.

"You don't think they saw us, do you, Bob?" Jack whispered.

"No, but it kind of looks as though they thought someone was on their trail they are talking so low."

"Probably they just get that way being hunted most of the time as they are."

"Maybe."

It was about ten minutes later when they heard the man, who was with Royce, say:

"Wall, I reckon we'd better be hikin'. Red'll be on tender hooks till we get thar."

"How much farther is it?" they heard Royce ask.

"Not more'n two miles," the man replied.

"The trail's getting warm," Bob whispered as they started again as soon as they felt sure that they were out of sight.

"They won't stop to rest again, I reckon," Jack said.

"No, but we want to be mighty careful and not spill the beans now we're so close. If we muss things this time we may never get another chance."

"But I wish some of the boys were here. Wonder where they are."

"Goodness knows. But I doubt if they're very near."

While talking they were stealing silently along the narrow trail careful not to get too near but never letting the men get entirely out of hearing. They had gone perhaps a mile when the trail ran into a much wider one coming from the north and meeting it at nearly right angles.

"They've driven cattle along here all right," Jack declared as soon as he saw it."

"I'll say they have and, boy, we're on the way to his cache sure as little green apples give small boys the tummie ache," Bob declared.

"Looks like it and, from what that fellow said, it can't be a great way off."

"I reckon it's near enough so that some of his gang's apt to wander out this way most anytime."

"Meaning that from now on we want to be doubly careful."

"Meaning exactly that."

"Careful's my middle name from now on," Jack assured him.

"But what I can't make out is why we haven't crossed the Crotch trail before this, Bob mused.

"But we've made so many turns that like as not we've been going parallel with it a good part of the time," Jack suggested.

"You must be right, I reckon," Bob agreed.

They were going down hill now in a direction, so nearly as they could judge, away from the ranch. Huge trees, growing so closely together that their branches interlocked, lined both sides of the trail which except for the large and small rocks which were numerous, had been worn smooth by the passage of many cattle.

"I'd sure like to know where this trail starts," Bob declared a few minutes later.

"Well, the beginning of it must be mighty well hidden wherever it is or someone would have picked it up long before this. It's plain enough along here," Jack declared.

Bob was about to say something when they heard someone coming toward them.

"Quick, behind a tree," he ordered.

Two men were coming along the trail and, in another minute, they would have met. They were talking loudly enough so that the boys had no trouble in hearing them but, to their disappointment, they were speaking Spanish.

"Did you get any of it?" Jack asked as soon as they were out of hearing.

"Not very much but I heard one of them say something about a girl and, while I'm not certain, I think he was explaining to the other fellow that Hains would probably keep the girl for awhile and try to make some money out of her."

"You think he won't do as he agreed?"

"Why should he? Honor means nothing to him."

"I suppose not. I never did think much of this 'honor among thieves' stuff," Jack declared soberly.

"I was afraid of it. He's got a bad eye, that Hains," Bob said as he came out from behind the tree.

"How about waiting till after dark before we get any nearer?" Jack proposed. "It looks as though we've got to spend the night here in the woods anyhow and we're apt to run into some of those fellows any time now, and if they should catch us the fat would be in the fire for sure."

"I reckon you're right and it won't be very long to wait as it's beginning to thicken up a bit now. Gee, but some chow would go good about now."

"You said a mouthful but cheer up, we'll be hungrier than this before we get a chance to eat I reckon."

"You're a cheerful beggar," Bob grinned as he looked about for a good place to wait. "Let's get over behind that clump of trees. No one'll be apt to see us there."

They were hardly settled when they heard the two men coming back and they thanked their lucky stars, as Jack put it, that they had not kept on the trail. But they got no further information for the men did not speak a word as they went past. Slowly the shadows deepened and soon the moon peeped over the tree tops.

"She's going to be pretty near full tonight," Bob declared as he rose to stretch his legs.

"Wonder if it'll be a help or a hindrance to us," Jack mused.

"Hard to tell that when we don't know what we're going to be up against."

Another half hour passed and Bob again stood up.

"I reckon it's about as dark as it's going to get," he said.

"All right, let's go."

Keeping close together they walked slowly along the trail stopping every few minutes to listen. They were still going down hill and in places the descent was almost steep. They had covered about two hundred rods when they heard the murmur of voices.

"We're about there, I reckon," Bob whispered.

"It would seem so," Jack agreed.

"Suppose you stay here while I creep up and see what I can find out," Bob suggested.

"Nothing doing," Jack promptly vetoed the suggestion. "We stick together tonight. I can keep as still as you can and if we once got separated goodness knows what might happen."

"You're right. We'd better keep together, but we've got to be mighty careful. He had me once and it wasn't a pleasant experience let me tell you."

As they crept softly along the sound of the voices became clearer and soon they knew that they were only a few yards away. It was a wild place with the lofty hills, covered with the thick forest, rising on all sides, making a sort of natural amphitheatre. Regarding the size of the camp they could only guess

but they were sure it was not very large as there seemed but little space between the hills. They could hear the men talking but, although they listened for some time, they could only catch a word now and then and were unable to get the drift of the conversation.

"We've got to get nearer," Bob whispered softly.

"Think it's safe?" Jack asked.

"Nothing's safe here, but we must take a chance."

They had left the trail fifty feet back thinking it safer to be in the thick woods where they could find concealment behind the trees. They could plainly see the light from the big camp fire through the trees although it did not light up the forest for any distance and, moving foot by foot and feeling their way with the utmost caution, they finally crouched behind a large spruce not more than a dozen feet from the clearing. There were, however, several other trees between them and the camp so that they could only catch a glimpse now and then of the men as they moved about. But they did not dare to risk getting nearer. In a moment after they had gained their position they heard a man speak and now they could plainly hear what he was saying. Both recognized Hains' voice.

"So yer tried ter double cross me."

"Call it that if you like," Royce's voice replied.

"What else can yer call it?"

"Well, the kid licked me and I was helpless."

"Yer ought ter be shot for letting a kid like that get the best of yer. D'yer call yerself a man?"

"I do not, but not because of that."

"Wall, I reckon yer know what we do ter traiters, don't yer?"

"I don't care what you do to me just so you let the girl go," Royce replied shortly.

"But I ain't a goin' ter let her go, not till Stebbins pays a good big ransom fer her."

"But you gave your word."

"An' I tuk it back. Had my fingers crossed when I made that bargain," the man sneered.

"Then you're a bigger scoundrel than I thought."

"Yer better keep a civil tongue in yer mouth or it'll be the worse fer yer. I'm boss here an' what I say goes. Yer ain't in no position ter call me any names an' yer might git me mad an' when I git mad I'm a holy terror let me tell yer. But s'pose I give yer another chance ter stay with us?"

For a moment Royce hesitated as though considering the proposition and the boys strained their ears to catch his answer.

"You mean it?" he finally asked.

"Mebby."

"I'll accept on condition that you let the girl go," Royce said quickly.

"Yer're in no position ter make conditions," Hains snapped. "I want a plain yes or no."

"Yes, then."

Had they been mistaken in Royce's loyalty? It seemed so and, for an instant Bob condemned him bitterly, but the thought then struck him that it might be he was playing a deeper game, and he decided that he would withhold judgment until he was sure.

"All right, we'll consider yer' case an' let yer know in the mornin', meanwhile yer're a prisoner an' if yer try ter git away or anything yer'll get a hunk o' lead an' no questions asked. Git me?"

"I get you," Royce answered shortly.

Hains then called two of his men and the boys heard him give them orders to guard Royce during the night.

"An' if he gits away yer know what'll happen ter yer," he concluded.

They could hear the two men leading Royce away and Bob wondered whether or not the man deserved the fate that had overtaken him. He wished that he could get a better view of the place so as to be able to make some plan but knew it would be too dangerous to get any nearer while the men were moving about. Snatches of singing in a subdued tone reached them from time to time, and they could tell by the sounds that a number were playing cards close by the fire. How long would it be before they would

settle down for the night? Bob wondered after an hour had passed.

"It's about time to make a move, isn't it?"

Another hour had passed when Jack asked the question. They had crept back about fifty feet after the first hour had passed and they had learned nothing more, knowing that they would be safer and that the time would pass quicker if they could talk to each other.

"It's only ten o'clock," Bob replied after a glance at his watch. "I don't think we'd better do a thing till after twelve, and goodness knows what we're going to do then."

It was true they had been able to make no definite plan as they knew so little regarding the situation. That Sue was a prisoner was certain but as to whether she was guarded or simply tied they could only guess. It was fairly certain that at least one man would keep awake in order to be sure that Royce did not get away. They would take no chances in that direction after Hains' threat.

"Gee, but it don't seem as though I could wait two hours longer," Jack whispered.

"I know it's hard but I reckon we can stick it out if it's best," Bob encouraged him. "You know it's better to play it as safe as we can as much more than our own safety depends on us."

"You bet we'll do our best," Jack agreed.

By half past ten all was quiet about the camp save for the gentle whinnie of a horse or the sound of stamping hoofs as they moved about. The fire was dying down as they could now barely see it through the trees, and about eleven the moon passed under a cloud, drawing a pall of intense blackness over the forest. It was so dark that they could barely see each other's form although they were sitting so close together that their shoulders almost touched.

"Think it's lucky or unlucky about the moon?" Jack asked.

"Can't tell a thing about it. You see it may be a big help to us and then, on the other hand, it may be just the opposite. If we only knew just where she is I'd say it was a good thing but we don't and what I'm afraid of is that it's going to be a hard job to locate her now that we can't see anything."

"But if we can't see them it's some comfort to know that they can't see us either."

"But we mustn't lose sight of the fact that they have all the advantage in that they know where they're at and we don't."

"That's so," Jack agreed. "But it'll make it easier to get away after we get her," he added hopefully.

"You said it," Bob encouraged him.

For another hour they waited, now talking in whispers and then watching the sky hardly knowing whether they hoped the moon would reappear or

stay hidden. But it remained clouded over and there was a feeling in the air accompanied by a soft sighing of the trees which they knew indicated rain.

"It's twelve o'clock," Bob whispered.

"Then let's go."

"I wish, Jack, that you'd stay here and let me go alone," Bob said anxiously.

"I thought we'd settled that question some time ago. We stick together tonight."

"But——"

"There are no more buts now than there were then. Come on, let's go."

Had it not been for Bob's keen sense of direction they might have started in the wrong direction as they had nothing else to guide them. Even as it was Bob was not quite sure that he was right until he saw through the trees the dull glow of the dying camp fire. Foot by foot they crept on hardly daring to draw a full breath and stopping every two or three feet to listen.

Soon they could hear the deep breathing of sleeping men and now and then a loud snore caused an impatient movement on the part of some more silent sleeper. Presently they were on the edge of the clearing and, although the embers of the fire were barely glowing, they could distinguish, on the opposite side, what seemed to be several good sized tents. So near as they were able to judge they were

some thirty feet away and Bob drew Jack back as he whispered:

"We'll have to get around on the other side. She's probably in one of the tents. You saw them, didn't you?"

"I saw something that I thought might be tents but it was too dark to be sure."

"They were tents all right," Bob assured him.

Very slowly and carefully they picked their way foot by foot keeping as near the clearing as they dared. They knew that men accustomed to the life which they led were usually light sleepers and that even the breaking of a stick might be enough to give the alarm. The growth was very thick all about the camp and, short as the distance was, it was after one o'clock when they reached the side on which the tents were pitched.

"Now our ears are about the only things we've got to depend on," Bob whispered as he strained his to catch the slightest sound.

"Lucky they're good ones," Jack whispered back. "What are we going to do now?"

"There's only one thing we can do so far's I can see, and that is to get up close to the tents and listen. We can't go prowling around promiscuously you know."

"I know, but——"

"I'm in hopes that we can tell the difference be-

tween her breathing and the others," Bob explained.

"If she's asleep."

"Here's hoping."

Inch by inch they edged nearer until they were lying on the ground close behind one of the tents. At first they could hear nothing but after awhile the faint, but deep breathing which betokens the sound sleeper came to their ears. Listening with ears strained to the utmost Bob soon convinced himself that there were several men in that tent and, hoping that Hains had had the decency to at least give her a tent by herself, he nudged Jack and they began to squirm towards the next one which was only a few feet away.

Here the results were the same. There was no doubt that the tent was filled with men and they moved to the next. They had just reached it when a piercing shriek broke the stillness of the night.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ROUND UP.

THE shriek came from the tent directly in front of them and for a second Bob's heart seemed to stop beating. That it was Sue there could be no doubt. Jack started up but Bob caught him by the arm and dragged him back.

"S-s—s-h," he whispered. "Wait a minute."

"But——"

"Quiet."

Just then the sound of a man's voice, from around in front of the tent was heard.

"What in Sam Hill's the matter wid yer?"

For a moment there was no reply then they heard Sue's voice say:

"I guess I had the nightmare."

"What's the matter?"

This was Hains' voice and came from the tent to their right.

"'S allright," they heard the man, who had spoken first, reply, "Gal had a nightmare, that's all."

"She'd better not have 'em any more," they heard Hains growl and then all was still again.

Bob gave Jack's arm a pull, a signal which he understood, and they backed slowly into the forest until they were thirty or more feet from the tent.

"We've found her at any rate," Jack whispered.

"But we haven't got her out yet, not by a long shot."

"Long shot is right," Jack agreed. "What's the next move?"

"We've got to wait till everyone gets to sleep again in the first place. That yell must have woke them all up."

"It was loud enough to wake the dead pretty near," Jack agreed.

"Looks as though they had posted a guard in front of her tent," Bob suggested.

"No doubt of it. Think we can get the jump on him?"

"Too risky."

"Then what?"

"Well, I'm not sure, of course, but it sounded to me as though she was pretty close to the back of the tent and I think our best bet is to get up as close as we can and try to attract her attention. She probably won't go to sleep for some time after that scare and we ought to make her hear without disturbing the guard. He's apt to be asleep anyhow, especially if she's tied and I reckon there's not much doubt about that."

"Good plan," Jack whispered enthusiastically. "How soon can we try it?"

"I'd say in about a half hour."

The half hour passed after what seemed a long time and Bob whispered that it was time to make the attempt.

"But wait a minute," he ordered, and Jack knew that he was breathing a prayer and his own heart echoed the silent petition. A few minutes more and they were again lying close behind the tent. A slight but distinct sound soon convinced them that the girl was not asleep but was moving as though to ease her cramped limbs.

Raising the side of the tent a few inches Bob trust his face beneath it and whispered faintly.

"Sue."

The moving stopped, but there was no answer.

"Sue," he whispered, this time a trifle louder.

"Who is it?"

The reply was so low that he barely caught the words.

"It's Bob," he whispered back.

"Thank God!"

There was a volume of relief in the words and both boys knew how great must have been her fear.

"Are you tied?" Bob asked.

"Yes."

"Both hands and feet?"

"Yes."

"Can you get your hands back close to the side of the tent?"

"I'll try. Wait a minute."

He got his knife ready and soon he felt her hands as she pushed them behind her, and in another minute they were free.

"Now hand me the knife and I'll free my feet," she whispered with a deep sigh of relief. "Wait a minute till I get the circulation started and I'll be with you."

"What's the matter in thar? Having another night horse?"

The boys held their breath as they heard the guard push aside the flap of the tent. Were they to fail just when success seemed assured?

"I-I guess not," they heard Sue say.

"Thought I heard you whisperin'."

"If your hands and feet were tied as tight as mine I reckon you'd do more than whisper," she told him.

"It's too bad, but I don't dare do nuthin'."

"Reckon I can stand it," they heard her tell him.

"Reckon yer'll have ter."

The man went out and the boys could hear her sigh of relief. For some moments they waited not daring to whisper again and then a slight movement from inside the tent warned them that she was edging closer to the wall of the tent. Bob slipped the guy

rope from one of the pegs and, in another minute she was on the outside.

Without even a whisper they crept noiselessly back into the forest until they felt that they were safe.

"How'd you ever find me?" Sue whispered as she leaned back against a tree.

In a few words Bob told her how they had stumbled onto the trail and had followed Royce and the other man to the cache.

"Is Royce here?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes, he's here."

"But I thought—" she began, but Bob interrupted her.

"Just a minute and you'll understand."

"And you mean that he said he'd stay with that gang?" she asked after he had told her about the bargain Hains had made.

"That's what he said, but I honestly believe he had a motive back of it. You see, he probably thought it was the only way he could help you?"

"And you say they're holding him prisoner now?"

"Yes."

"Then we've got to rescue him."

"I wish we could but I'm afraid it's impossible," Bob told her sadly.

"Why is it?" she asked.

"Because two of the men are guarding him and Hains threatened them if they let him get away."

"But when they find I've escaped they'll most likely kill him," she insisted.

Neither of the boys had any answer to this and, after a moment's wait she continued:

"Couldn't we do it the same as you did for me?"

"I don't see how," Jack spoke for the first time since they had mentioned Royce. "You see if they've got him in one of the tents it's dead certain that he isn't there alone and we couldn't make him know that we're here without telling some of the gang at the same time."

"Jack's right," Bob declared. "I'd risk most anything to get him out of their clutches but that wouldn't be a risk, it'd be a dead sure thing."

"But it's awful when he gave himself up to save me," Sue moaned.

"I know it is," Bob agreed, "but it seems to me the best thing we can do for him is to get back as soon as we can and bring the boys in here."

"But you'll never be able to find your way back home in this darkness," she objected.

"Gracious, I never thought of that, and we're a long way from home too," Bob sighed.

"And it would be worse than useless to try and find our way back tonight," Jack added.

"Then what can we do?" Sue asked.

"I think we'd beter get a little farther away from here the first thing," Bob advised. "You see that

fellow may miss you most any time and he'll raise the camp when he does."

He had hardly spoken when they heard a shout from the direction of the tent.

"The gal's gone," a man cried and a moment later there was a perfect bedlam of shouts as they evidently realized that someone must have helped her escape.

"Keep close together and make as little noise as possible," Bob ordered as he sprang to his feet.

He had little idea in which direction he ought to go, but his one thought was to avoid the trail and to put much distance between them and the camp as possible. The moon was still hidden, although the rain had held off, and they were obliged to go slowly to avoid running into the trees. From the sounds behind them they knew that the outlaws were already scattering to take up the search and Bob blamed himself that they had waited so long.

Fifteen minutes passed and they could hear men on both sides of them as they beat the woods and several times flashes of light told them that some, at least, of the outlaws had electric flashlights. It was only a question of time, Bob thought, when they would be caught and he shuddered to think what would become of them. But he did not lose heart, instead he urged the others to greater speed although he knew that they were going about as fast as was possible.

"Don't get separated whatever you do," he cautioned.

"You can't lose us," Sue panted close at his heels.

"'And Jack came tumbling after'," Jack added cheerful even in the face of danger.

"Do you know which way we're going?" Sue asked a few minutes later.

"I'm pretty certain that we're going in the opposite direction from the ranch."

"Then perhaps we'd better turn off to the left," Jack suggested.

"Too risky," Bob advised. "We'd be almost sure to run into one of those fellows. I think we'd better keep on even if we are going away from the ranch."

"I think so too," Sue said and added: "We seem to be distancing them."

Bob had begun to feel a bit easier as he had noticed that the sounds made by their enemies were farther off than when they had started and, for the first time he really dared hope that they would get away. Then suddenly there was a crashing of underbrush just to their right and, almost before they had time to think, a beam of light struck Bob square in the face and the form of Red Hains loomed up behind it.

"So it's you, eh?" he growled as he took a step forward.

Bob afterward declared that had he stopped to think he would never have dared attempt what he

did. As the man stepped forward it happened that the boy was standing on a bit of a knoll and, almost without thinking, he lunged forward dashing his fist with all his strength into the man's face. The action was so sudden and entirely unexpected that the man had no time to protect himself and the blow caught him fairly on the point of the chin. He went over backward without a sound save the crackling of the brush as he struck the ground, the torch falling from his hand as he fell. The light was switched on and Jack quickly sprang forward and grabbed it up.

"Get your gun on him, Bob," he cried.

Bob already had his automatic out but there was no use for it. Hains lay like one dead.

"A knock out clean's a whistle," Jack declared as he bent over the man.

"What a peach of a punch," Sue gasped.

"Let's beat it before he wakes up," Bob advised.

"It's too bad we haven't got something to tie him with," Jack declared.

"What's the matter with a handkerchief?" Sue suggested.

"Better than nothing. Roll him over, Jack, and I'll tie his hands behind him. I can do it so that it'll take him a while to get free."

He worked quickly and in a few seconds the man's hands were as securely bound as was possible under the circumstances.

"Now gag him," Sue ordered.

This was done with Jack's handkerchief and they again set off convinced that it would be some time at least before he would be able to follow them.

"It's a lucky thing for us that he was alone," Jack declared a few minutes later as they stopped to listen.

No sound, save the rustle of the branches as they swayed in the light breeze came to them and they concluded that the men must have given up the search. They went on for another half hour, during which time they heard no sound from their pursuers, and Bob suggested that they stay where they were until it began to get light.

"I think we'll be able to get our bearings as soon as it is light and there's no use in getting any farther away than we have to."

"Second the motion," Jack said throwing himself on the ground.

"I don't believe it's going to rain after all," Bob declared as he too sank down by his side.

"What time is it?" Sue asked.

"Half past two."

"Then it'll begin to lighten up in about an hour."

"I reckon," Jack agreed.

"Do you suppose there's any chance that Royce got away in the confusion?" Sue asked.

"He might have," Bob replied, but in his heart

he doubted it greatly. He had heard Hains when he told the men to guard him and he knew that they feared him.

They had been there about half an hour, at times whispering and again dozing for a few minutes, when Sue's quick ears caught a sound which escaped the boys.

"Someone or something is coming this way," she whispered.

"I didn't hear anything," Bob said as he drew the revolver from his pocket resolved to take no chances.

"Listen a minute and you will," Sue told him.

"I hear it," Jack declared just then.

"I'll bet it's Hains," Bob said as he got to his feet. "Let's keep perfectly still and maybe he'll go by without spotting us."

It was soon evident that the man or animal was coming directly toward them and soon Bob changed his opinion as to its identity. Hains would never make so much noise in passing through the woods, even if he was hunting no one. This must be either a stray steer or a man unused to the forest, for he was making, as Jack whispered, more noise than a train of cars

Bob knew that he was only a few feet away when he flashed the light, which Hains had dropped, and at the same time ordered whoever it was to stop.

"Oh, it's he," Sue cried joyfully as she jumped for the man.

"Royce, sure as guns," Jack added.

"Good boy." Bob shoved the revolver back in his pocket and then they were all trying to shake hands with him at the same time.

"Now tell us all about it," Sue ordered when the first greetings were over.

"But first tell us if you think they're after you," Bob said. "Safety first, you know."

"I think they've given it up," he told them. "They almost had me a dozen times, but I managed to slip them and I haven't heard a thing for the last half hour."

"But how did you get away?" Sue demanded impatiently.

"Well, they had me tied, that is my hands were tied behind my back, but I'm pretty good when it comes to getting ropes loose, and I had very little trouble in fixing it so that I could slip the knot any time I wanted to."

"Didn't they tie your feet?" Sue asked as he paused.

"No, I guess they thought I wouldn't go very far with my hands tied, and with two men standing guard over me. Well, I was in a tent with four or five of them and was sound asleep when someone shouted that you had got away. Maybe I wasn't

glad. The men all jumped up and rushed out of the tent, all but one, and as soon as they were gone I jumped him. It was darker'n pitch in the tent and I don't know where I hit him, but it must have been in a pretty good place, because he dropped like a log and I beat it. He must have come to pretty soon, though, for they were after me in almost no time and how I ever got away I don't know."

"Did you know that we were following you?" Bob asked.

"I didn't till we were almost to the camp. Then I looked back just as we made a sharp turn in the trail and saw you. Then I knew that you were watching while Hains was talking to me there because I saw that bush move. I 'spect you thought I'd turned yellow again, but I figured it was the only way I'd stand even a chance to help her."

"Just what I thought," Bob assured him.

"Do you know where we are?" Royce asked.

"No, haven't an idea, but I think we can find the way out as soon as it gets light," Bob told him.

"Well, if you take my advice we'll keep going right now. They'll be after us again as soon as day breaks."

"All right, come on. It'll begin to get light most any time now, but be careful and don't get separated," Bob cautioned as he started off.

The first hint of the coming dawn stole over the

forest soon after they set out and it was not long before they were able to see for several feet ahead.

"That's East over there," Bob pointed as he stopped and he looked about him, "and that's the way we want to go, but it'll take us right back toward that camp."

"Then I guess we'll have to make a wide circle," Jack said.

"And you're guessing just about right," Bob assured him.

"Do you have any idea as to how far we are from the foot of the hills?" Royce asked.

"Not much, but it's a long way all right, especially on an empty stomach," Bob answered.

"Empty stomach," Jack echoed. "Gee, I could eat raw sidewinder and think it was a fried trout."

"It's too bad," Sue consoled them. "I had some supper last night, so I'm not quite starved, but you must be empty clear down to your toes."

While they had been talking they had been pushing their way toward the South, making as good time as possible. Another hour and the sun was up over the tops of the trees and it began to warm up, although the night had not been cold. Bob had nothing but the sun to guide him, but he was an expert when it came to finding his way through the trackless forest and he had little fear of not being able to find his way out provided their strength held out.

That was his main source for worry now. Tramping through the dense woods when one has not eaten for twenty-four hours is no joke and he was beginning to feel a bit weak and he knew that Jack was no stronger than he.

He was leading the way some feet in advance of the others when, suddenly, he drew his revolver and fired.

"Here's some breakfast for us," he cried as he plunged forward and picked up a large rabbit. "It'll be a bit flat without salt, but it'll give us strength," he told them.

Fortunately he had a box of matches and they were not long in finding a good place for a fire close by a small stream. There was plenty of dead wood about and while Bob dressed the animal Jack started the fire going and in less than fifteen minutes the rabbit was roasting.

"Wish I had a hook and line," Jack said as he felt through his pockets. "I'll bet there are trout in that brook."

But none of them had so much as a pin and they were forced to give up their hope of trout.

"I suppose it's pretty risky building a fire, but without it I don't believe we'd have strength enough to get out," Bob said as he turned the rabbit.

The meal was, as Bob had predicted, somewhat flat, but there is nothing like real hunger to make a

meal taste right and there was not a trace of anything but the bones left when they had finished.

"Never cared much for rabbit before but that certainly did hit the right spot," Jack declared.

"Now we want to make as good time as we can," Bob said as they were ready to start once more. "It's more than likely that they've seen the smoke from our fire and are on our trail."

Much strengthened by the meal they set out with renewed courage and, stopping only when it was necessary for a breathing spell, they kept on hour after hour. Bob was afraid that Sue would not be able to keep up the pace but, to his surprise, she seemed absolutely tireless and often urged them to greater speed. It was shortly after noon when they came to a trail, and halted for a rest.

"Why, this is the trail to The Owl's Head," Sue declared as they were about to start again.

"Are you sure?" Bob asked.

"Sure is right. See that big tree right there? Well you look on the other side of it and you'll find my initials, S. B., cut in the bark about four feet from the ground."

"Right you are," Jack announced a moment later. "It's S. B. all right."

"Then you ought to know about how far we are from the edge of the woods," Bob said.

"It's about three miles from here to the foot of the hills," she told them.

"That's good news," Bob assured her. "I really didn't think we were so near out."

"An' yer not quite as near as yer think."

They all jumped at the sound of the voice which came from a thicket a little to their right, and their hearts sank as six men, headed by Red Hains, stepped out into the trail. Every man carried a revolver in his hand and Bob realized at once that resistance would be useless.

"It'll be some time afore yer out o' the woods, I reckon," Hains sneered.

"Perhaps not so long as you think."

The last words came from the other side of the trail and Sue's heart leaped for joy as she recognized her father's voice.

"We've got ever one of you covered and the first man that makes a move will never make another."

As he spoke, Jeb, followed by nearly all the men on the Lazy S., stepped out from the bushes and at least one gun covered each of the outlaws.

"Frisk 'em, Slim," Jeb ordered after he had told them to throw their guns on the ground.

The surprise was complete and the outlaws made no resistance.

"My baby!" There were tears in Jeb's eyes as

he took Sue in his arms, and Bob noticed that his eyes were not the only wet ones.

The stories were soon told and more tears rolled down Jeb's cheeks as he grasped the boys by the hand. Royce, too, came in for his full share of praise and it was a happy crowd that, shortly after, started down the trail.

They found the horses at the foot of the hills and the boys, together with Jeb, Sue and Royce, set off at once for the ranch, leaving the rest to bring in the captured gang.

Charlie had a big meal ready for them almost as soon as they arrived, and how they did eat.

"But it's got nothing on that rabbit," Jack declared as he passed his plate for his third helping of chicken.

CHAPTER XIV.

CONCLUSION.

THEY had been sitting on the porch after the meal for some two hours talking over the last adventure, which had resulted so happily, when Sue cried:

"Here they come."

The boys, headed by Slats and Slim, were just turning in at the gate and a few minutes later they had herded the gang of outlaws in front of the porch. They were a sullen and dejected looking lot, all except Red Hains, whose face still bore a defiant air.

"What'll we do with these birds, Jeb?" Slats called out.

"Give 'em a necktie party," one of the boys called out.

"That's what," another agreed.

"No, we won't do that," Jeb declared as he stepped off the porch. "They deserve it no doubt, that is to say, some of them do, but it's for the law to decide, not us. I've phoned to town and the sheriff'll be out here with some of his men as soon's he can make it. Ought to be in an hour or so. So you'd better take them down to the corral and let

two or three of the boys stand guard over them. But play it safe."

"Yer'er a shoutin' we'll play it safe," Slats assured him. "Right about face. Now hep up thar an' no turnin' of eyes," he ordered the prisoners.

As they turned away Bob glanced at his brother with a questioning look in his eyes. He was not quite sure but he fancied that he had detected a look of satisfaction flash over the face of Red Hains when Jeb announced that the sheriff would soon be there, and he wondered if Jack had noticed it.

Jack looked puzzled as though he was uncertain what Bob was trying to ask and the latter shook his head slightly as if to say that it did not matter. But it so happened that, a few minutes later, they were alone on the porch and he was quick to ask:

"What did you mean, Bob?"

"Did you see Red's face when Jeb said that Skeets would be out soon?"

"No, why?"

"Maybe it was my imagination, but I fancied he seemed mighty pleased at the idea, and I wondered if you noticed it."

"Sorry, but I must have been looking somewhere else."

"Probably it doesn't matter but——"

"You mean——?"

"Well, you know Jeb's opinion regarding the sheriff."

"Sure, and you think that Red thinks that he'll give them a chance to get away."

"Something like that."

"Then we'd better speak to Jeb about it, don't you think?"

"I suppose so, but I don't know as it'll do any good. There's nothing definite against him, you know."

"And I reckon it's too late now anyhow, for there he comes if I'm not mistaken," Jack said pointing toward the gate.

Six horsemen were riding in through the gate and, as they swept up in front of the porch, Jeb came out through the door.

"Skeets isn't with them," Jack had whispered to Bob just before the men drew their horses to a halt.

"Hello, boys. Where's Skeets?" Jeb greeted them.

A tall lanky man with a fierce looking black mustache acted as spokesman.

"That prutty hard ter say right now. Yer see Skeets he resigned his job's soon's he got yer telephone message an' the last seen o' him he was makin' tracks for the railroad station."

"You mean he's gone?" Jeb asked.

"I reckon."

"Then I guess there's not much doubt but that he was in cahoots with Red."

"That's how we figger it."

"Then who's sheriff?"

"I reckon I'm it fer the time bein' seein' how I was first deputy."

"And I don't know of a man I'd rather see have the job," Jeb declared as he held out his hand.

"You said something," one of the men declared.

"They don't make 'em better'n Jake Grubb," another added.

The new sheriff seemed much embarrassed at those eulogies and muttered about the job being pushed on to him, then, turning to Jeb, he said:

"I reckon you know thar's a reward o' \$2,000 fer the capture o' Red Hains."

"Sure, I know it," Jeb replied.

"Well, who gits it?"

"Bob and Jack Lakewood," a voice sang out from behind them.

It was Slats Magee who made the statement. He had come up from the corral and had heard the sheriff ask the question.

"Not much," Bob spoke up quickly. "We didn't catch him."

"Who did then?" Slats demanded.

"I guess you had as much to do with it as anyone," Bob laughed.

"Wal, it goes ter some o' yer crowd," the sheriff said to Jeb. "I reckon yer can fight that out among yerselves. I've got ter get a hustle on if I'm goin' ter git that gang in the jail afore dark. Come on, boys, let's go."

Bob knew, a few moments later, when the outlaws were led out of the corral, that he had been right. If ever a man's face expressed despair it was Red Hains' when he found that Skeets was not with the men who had come to take them to the jail.

"He was counting on Skeets to let him get away all right," he told Jack after they had gone.

"Now about that reward," Slat said as they stood by the corral gate.

"It goes to you fellows," Bob told him in a decided tone.

"Not so you'd notice it," Slim declared and his statement was applauded by all the hands including Jeb and Sue. "Yer see, if it hadn't been fer you two boys we'd never have got 'em," Slim explained.

"But we didn't catch them: they caught us," Bob insisted. Then, seeing that they were determined, he said: "I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll take the money and get the best radio outfit we can buy for the ranch and what's left over will be used as a fund for us all, to get anything that we all can enjoy. All in favor say aye."

After a little hesitation and talking among them-

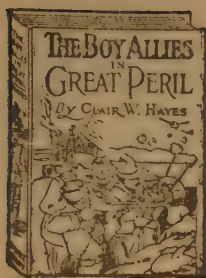
selves it was decided to do as Bob had suggested and he was appointed a committee of one to purchase the outfit.

"They're a great bunch of fellows," Bob whispered to Jack as they walked back to the house.

"The best ever," Jack agreed.

They learned the next day that the outlaws were lodged safely in jail and the entire district for miles around breathed easier.

THE END.



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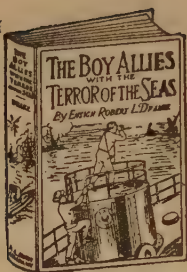
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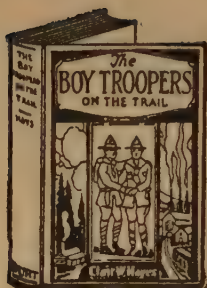
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